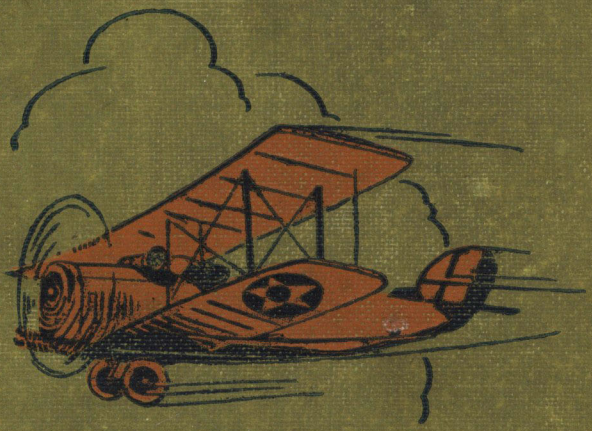
REX LEE ON THE BORDER PATROL



THOMSON BURTIS

Hartwell
from
Evelyn

Dec. 25, 1929

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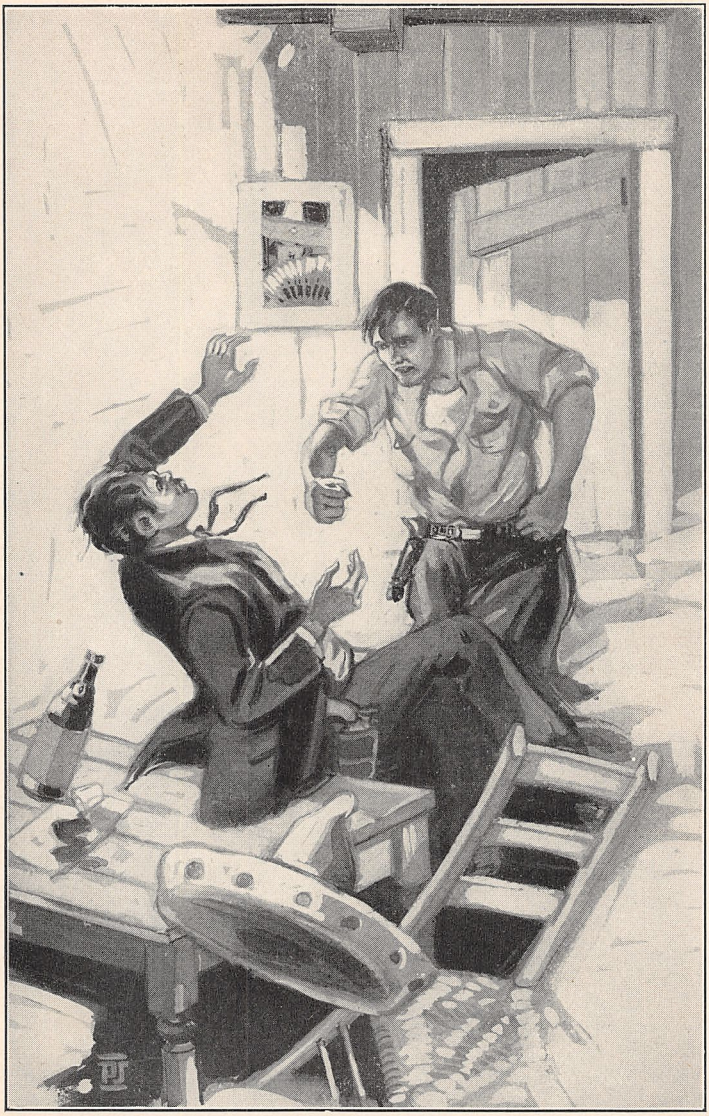

FINALLY REX SENT FITZPATRICK AGAINST THE TABLE WITH A BLOW UNDER THE EAR.

Rex Lee on the Border Patrol. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 218)

REX LEE
ON THE
BORDER PATROL

BY

THOMSON BURTIS

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REX LEE, GYPSY FLYER

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REX LEE ON THE BORDER PATROL

CHAPTER I

A SURPRISE PACKAGE

ALONG the border, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of California, stretches a land which has been the setting for uncounted songs and stories and the scene of numberless life-and-death dramas more romantic, more deadly, more human than words on paper can convey. In the days of the old West the Rio Grande, the Pecos, the Big Bend, the deserts—all were names fraught with meaning, because they brought with them associations of a pioneer country where men of the outdoors fought their way against nature and each other by the rudimentary law of the individual.

And only the hardiest among men and animals could survive for long, whether in the primitive warfare against heat and storm and

desert waste or in the flashing battle of six-gun and knife.

Today, in the twentieth century, that same land still stubbornly resists the march of cities and factories and blossoming farms. There are hundreds of miles of mesquite wilderness where a man can wander for days without food or water. The Big Bend, vast and forbidding, still harbors men whom a none too particular country has outlawed. The flaming deserts of the far Southwest are deadly as of yore. And the struggle of the border is going on as it was fifty years ago—not so open a struggle, perhaps, but still raw and elemental.

There are still men along the border who prize their ability to draw and shoot and ride as priceless, because those things mean life to them. The smuggler, the bandit, the gunman, the outlaw—they are still there, and a handful of men who represent the law of a great country fight them ofttimes hand to hand or gun to gun.

And yet the same land, last outpost of the old pioneer days, is spanned by a thread that represents the peak of civilization's accomplishment. For hundreds of miles there are

stretches of desert and wilderness and mountains that are now as they were a hundred years ago, but above them, twice a day from Gulf to Gulf, the airplanes of the Army Air Service border patrol keep watchful eyes on the tempestuous land below.

Civilization has sent the fruits of its most recent conquest to span the border, and the Army's youngest branch of the service has sent its best to man them. Whether the airdromes of the patrol lie in the heart of the Big Bend, like Marfa and Sanderson, or whether they be near Douglas or El Paso, the airplanes and the men who fly them have but one duty —to watch unceasingly the seething border country.

The McMullen flight of the patrol counted themselves unusually fortunate. McMullen was a live, progressive town which was proud that the flight was located there, and showed it. And in recent months its pride had been justified to an unusual extent, if notoriety counted for anything. The McMullen flight had become very prominent, largely through the instrumentality of one Lieutenant Rex Lee, who was a young man possessed of a boundless

facility for getting into scraps that was only exceeded by his ability to get out of them with much credit.

This particular afternoon he was engaged in one of his favorite devices for passing leisure moments pleasurably; namely, arousing the ire of "Pop" Cravath, adjutant of the flight.

Cravath was older than the other officers of the group, by several years, and his years had not taught him to dissemble wrath. At the slightest provocation he would burst forth into a series of crackling remarks and blistering expressions of a distinctly blasphemous trend that caused his comrades to sit back in open-mouthed admiration. Withal he was much the most conscientious and precise member of the group, the C.O. included.

Recently he had taken a notion to learn something about meteorology. McMullen was equipped with instruments and a few trained enlisted men wherewith to gain information in advance about the weather. One of the meteorological section's daily duties was to send up large hot-air balloons, which they studied through a theodolite as they sailed aloft,

thereby figuring the direction and velocity of the wind at different altitudes. By these data the flyers were able to know the exact altitude at which the wind would help them most or hinder them least. Cravath had been diligently studying the intricacies of meteorology of late, and today he was going to make the balloon observations himself.

The shack used by the weather experts faced the rear of the recreation building. Rex Lee, armed with an ordinary slingshot and some BB shot, watched the door of the shack closely from the recreation hall. The window curtains screened him. A half-dozen airmen were with him, waiting with much anticipation.

Cravath appeared at the door of the shack, tenderly holding a large red balloon, completely inflated. Rex quickly stooped and sighted his slingshot through a convenient knot hole. Taking careful aim, he let go and a satisfying smack from without was the result.

"Hey!" yelled Cravath, surveying the tattered remains in his hands with much disgust.

He disappeared into the shack once more for another balloon.

He reappeared shortly, his new balloon bobbing about as he held it with meticulous care. Once again Rex fired, and was rewarded with another loud report of bursting rubber and a truly remarkable series of expletives from the adjutant.

The men inside strangled their laughter with their hands until Pop had disappeared once more into the weather sanctum.

"The next time he comes out he's going to have a stroke!" chuckled Binder. "I'll bet he talks for half an hour and never says the same thing twice!"

"Pop sure hasn't learned to guard what his tongue saith," remarked Rex, keeping a wary eye on the door opposite.

Little Pete Miller suddenly exploded without warning into a loud laugh, expelling clouds of cigaret smoke which caused him to cough and laugh at the same time.

"I was just thinking of how Pop bawled out Sergeant Roper the other day when three defective balloons burst in succession," he explained.

Captain Kennard, C.O. of the flight, strolled into the room.

"What's the excitement?" he inquired as he surveyed the group.

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned big George Hickman with uplifted hand.

Cravath was once more emerging into the sunlight, walking as if on eggs and holding the balloon as if it were the most precious of possessions. Rex allowed him to take three or four steps toward the observation tower before he shot once more.

This time the bursting balloon stung Cravath's fingers. His comrades, weak with suppressed mirth, listened delightedly while the fiery adjutant launched into a comprehensive survey of balloons, meteorology and anything or anybody connected with the same. He soared to truly awe-inspiring heights of verbiage.

Captain Kennard finally composed himself sufficiently to ask—

"Who conceived this idea—you, Rex?"

Rex looked down from his six-foot-two into the twinkling eyes of the stocky captain.

"I admit it, with pride," he grinned. "Boy, did you see him hop when the last one of them hit him?"

"I heard it, anyway," laughed the C.O. "Well, it's time for officers' meeting."

The little company filed out of the room and across into the captain's office. The remainder of the dozen officers who composed the flight were awaiting them there—all except Cravath.

"Go to the meteorological shack and get Lieutenant Cravath," ordered the C.O., and the orderly departed.

While he was gone, Rex explained the reason for the mirth of the recent arrivals. Cravath entered in a moment, his face still red with wrath, and seated himself behind his desk.

"Captain," he began unceremoniously, "I want to make a kick about those damn balloons. Three of them—"

He did not get any farther. When the officers recovered and Cravath comprehended what had happened, the dignified adjutant decided to laugh with them. He gazed at Rex, lounging easily against the wall, with twinkling eyes belying his contemptuous expression.

"If you found the time hanging heavy on your hands, Rex, you'd play with a rattle!" he observed.

Lee was a continual puzzle to Cravath—even Captain Kennard sometimes wondered whether he understood Rex, and the captain knew human nature. The tall young flyer was such a curious combination of boyishness and ability to take care of himself under any circumstances or in any company that he sometimes seemed like two separate individuals in one.

"Well, let's get to business and get this thing over," said the C.O. "Cravath, are there any orders to read?"

The adjutant read a couple of War Department circulars which had been received that day, and then indicated that he was through. The captain settled back in the swivel chair behind his desk and lit a cigaret. His mouth stretched in a broad grin that made the big scar on his cheek wrinkle deeply as he surveyed his staff of flyers and observers. He ran his hand through the short, bristly pompadour that stuck up on his head and then shook his head sadly.

"I've got bad news for you," he began. "Not so bad for you, maybe, as for the boys at Donovan Field. It's about booze."

He quickly shuffled through the papers on his

desk, finally drawing out a letter which he glanced over as if to refresh his memory.

"It seems that a few days ago a representative of the law in San Antonio, acting presumably at the instigation of some San Antonio reformers, came out to Donovan Field and raised Cain with Colonel Mills about the liquor being carried from the border to Donovan Field. The last dance they had was pretty well oiled with *tequila, aguardiente* and whisky, I guess. This minion of the State likewise made some cracks about there being some suspicion that maybe some of the boys were carrying opium up to make a little kale. Of course that's ridiculous."

A chuckle ran around the circle of flyers.

"Well, anyhow," the captain resumed, cocking a contemplative eye at the last of the smoke ring, "they're squawking about it up around effete San Antonio, and orders from headquarters are that every ship coming in from—or back to Donovan Field from—the border, will be thoroughly searched and severe disciplinary action taken on the pilot of any ship carrying any of the demon rum. I imagine the civilian authorities may swoop down at any

moment, likewise, for a little private search."

He grinned as a thought struck him. He looked at Rex.

"When you and George fly up to Donovan tomorrow you'll have a chance to see it at first hand," he said.

His face became serious again.

"All kidding aside, fellows, orders are orders, and we'll live up to them. The rest of the border had better do it, too, because it's a cinch that the lid is going to pop when they catch somebody, especially if any civilian official pokes his nose in. That's all."

CHAPTER II

UNDER ARREST

NEXT morning the sun rose in a cloudless sky, giving promise of a terrifically hot day, so Rex and George Hickman, his observer, decided to get an early start for Donovan Field before the mounting sun made the flying bumpy. Consequently it was only seven-thirty when Sergeant Cary, chief mechanic of the flight, started to warm up the big four hundred and fifty horsepower Liberty motor in Lee's De Haviland plane.

Rex, who was engineer officer and test pilot of the flight, was to test a new De Haviland at Donovan Field and fly it back to McMullen, leaving the old ship there for overhaul and repair, it having had its allotted number of hours in the air. Big, blondly handsome Hickman was going along just to take a look at San Antonio and see a show. Early as it was, Pete Mills and Wallace had started on the eastern morning patrol, and Binder and Cra-

vath were fifty miles on their way westward along the Rio Grande.

Lee and Hickman, swinging their helmets and goggles in their hands, strolled from the mess-hall toward the ship, which had been started and was idling gently. The air was quiet, for it was too early for the Gulf breeze to be stirring. The airdrome, four hundred yards square, was bounded on three sides by hangars, frame barracks, mess-halls and storehouses. Their ship was on the line in front of the hangars.

The roar of the motor increased as Cary slid the throttle forward a trifle. The wheels began to press against the blocks that held them, and the two mechanics who were holding each wing set themselves to hold the ship. Little by little the throttle crept forward, under the sergeant's careful hand, until the man sitting on the tail to keep the ship from nosing up was compelled to turn his back and lean against the propeller blast. For a few seconds the noise of the twelve mighty cylinders firing in rotation was almost deafening, and then as slowly as the motor had been turned on it was cut down to idling.

Rex and Hickman fastened their helmet straps and adjusted their goggles as Cary climbed out of the cockpit. The pilot adjusted his belt, tried both switches, and studied air, oil and temperature gauges briefly. He turned around and Hickman nodded that he was ready. Rex signalled the mechanics, who pulled the wheel blocks. There being no wind, he slowly pushed the throttle and spark ahead until both were wide open. A little pressure on the stick and the tail came up. For a hundred yards they roared across the ground, and then the hard-packed sand dropped away beneath them.

Rex hunched down farther behind the windshield, as they circled the field, to escape the terrific pressure of air which was the result of their whirring propeller and a hundred miles an hour of air speed. Two circles of the field brought them to two thousand feet and assured him that the motor was running well. He banked around and headed north for the two hundred and fifty mile grind to Donovan Field.

There being no particular hurry, he followed the railroad. It was thirty miles shorter to fly an airline straight across the mesquite, but

along the railroad there were a few fields which might be possible landing places if the motor cut out. To the border patrol flyer, accustomed to gamble his life against his motor as he flew for hours over trackless mesquite, it seemed very comfortable to have any cleared places at all below him.

It was thoroughly characteristic of Rex to take the railroad course instead of the airline, although the average person who knew him would expect him to take a chance on the shorter but more dangerous route. He had won his reputation as the premier pilot of the border by a succession of brilliant, often reckless, flying achievements. A dozen times his fellow pilots had watched him stall down in a De Haviland, than which there is no more ticklish or expert bit of flying, and gasped at the chance he was taking. But in doing that he was depending on his ability to handle the ship.

Should he take the airline to San Antonio, no skill of his could save a crackup, perhaps death to both passengers, in the event of a forced landing in the thick mesquite. Consequently, inasmuch as there was no need for haste, he did the safest thing.

Rex possessed, unconsciously perhaps, a great confidence in himself that was the result of experience and self-knowledge, minus conceit. Nine out of ten people who knew him only by reputation would have rubbed their eyes with wonder that he should take the safest course. When Rex became reckless, it was a calculating recklessness that depended little on the infallibility of an airplane motor and much on the flying ability of Rex Lee.

A half-hour, and the ship had climbed gradually to five thousand feet. The edge of the mesquite wilderness, a hundred and fifty miles long, slipped behind them. To the left, as far as the eye could see, the scrubby forest of grayish-green billowed away to the skyline. The ship was slightly right-wing heavy, but nevertheless the sturdy motor drew it through the air at a hundred miles an hour, even though it was throttled down to fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. Once in a while Rex was compelled to pump the air, which failed to hold up to three pounds but otherwise the old ship seemed to have escaped the effect of age.

The last fifty miles of the trip, which were over more open country, were rather bumpy,

as the rapidly heating atmosphere started currents of warm and cold air that reached even to five thousand feet. Both airmen were glad to see the level expanse of Donovan Field come into view, the mile-long rows of hangars, barracks and machine shops standing out vividly white against the green. Rex started to dive when he was still ten miles from the field, throttling his motor to twelve hundred. By taking a long, gradual dive with motor partly on, overfast cooling was prevented, and the spark plugs would not foul. Right to the last the great Liberty did its duty—every gauge read correctly as the big ship shot over the southern edge of Donovan Field and the motor went full on again.

Rex circled the field at five hundred feet to look at the landing T. It was pointing southwest. He sideslipped over the hangars and with instinctive judgment leveled out less than two feet above the ground. The speed dropped to seventy-five, then to seventy miles an hour. For just an instant the ship seemed to hover and the pilot jerked back on the stick. The tail came down and they landed smoothly.

As they taxied to the line opposite hangar

II, where visiting ships were always taken care of, the two border pilots looked around them appreciatively. After the small, difficult air-drome at McMullen it was almost imposing even to them to watch a dozen ships at a time landing and taking off all around the mile-square field about them.

They found a niche on the line between a little S.E. 5 and a low-hung, wicked looking Le Père. As they climbed out Lieutenant Harrow, one of the assistant adjutants and two civilians approached quickly. They were standing beside the border ship before mechanics had a chance to get the blocks under the wheels. Rex nodded to Harrow, and then shut off his gas flow. After a half-minute the motor gurgled and spit, and then the propeller gradually stopped. He snapped off the switches—he had run the gas out to prevent back-firing—and crawled out.

"Hello, Harrow," he greeted the Donovan Field man, who had already shaken hands with Hickman.

" 'Lo, Rex. Just got Captain Kennard's wire that you were on the way a few minutes ago. Good trip?"

"Came by the railroad—2:45," returned Rex, expertly rolling a cigaret with one hand while he replaced the making in his pocket with the other.

"Meet Mr. Snow and Mr. Crillon—Lieutenant Lee and Lieutenant Hickman."

Both the civilians, who were middle-aged men of commonplace appearance, looked at the airmen with considerable interest.

"Heard a lot about you two—in fact, saw you in the movies," stated the stouter of the two, who had a red face and a jovial smile.

"Yes, when George hung out on the wing so we could land without a wheel he sure made us matinée idols," grinned Rex, referring to an incident that had been caught by the camera man of a news-weekly.

"Well, did you bring in any booze, Rex?" inquired Harrow, his blue eyes twinkling. "I hope you didn't because these two chaps are from the Department of Justice in San Antonio."

"What? Liquor?" asked Rex in horrified tones.

The stout man—Crillon—looked up at the broad-shouldered, tanned pilot apologetically.

Lee's mouth, which ordinarily had a whimsically humorous quirk at the corners, stretched into a grin and the crinkles around the keen blue eyes deepened.

"I don't know what got the chief started, but 'orders is orders' and we'll have to pry around a little, lieutenant," said Crillon.

"Help yourself," replied Rex, with a wave at the ship.

Their suitcases were wired on the wings, one on each side of the fuselage.

Snow, who had a pair of cold blue eyes and a cigar clamped in his mouth, immediately climbed up on the wing for a look at the cockpits. He had not said a word thus far except to acknowledge the introductions.

"What are you, an Army sleuth now?" Hickman asked Harrow.

"Representing headquarters," returned Harrow genially. "Get those suitcases unwired, will you, sergeant?"

Two of the mechanics, at a word from the sergeant in charge of the hangar, unwired the bags. Rex and Hickman smoked contentedly, watching the busy field idly. Scouts, bombers and training-planes were all discernible land-

ing and taking off, and down the line the noise of many motors warming up filled the air with a low drone.

The two operatives, with Harrow watching them, took a brief look at the suitcases and then closed them.

"Guess you get a clean bill of health, lieutenant," said Crillon.

"Why the sudden caution around these parts?" asked Rex.

Harrow shrugged his shoulders.

"Search me."

"And me," added Crillon. "This is my first shot at it, and the chief told me nothing."

"We might take this off," said Snow suddenly, his hands on the turtleback which forms the top of the fuselage.

"All right," replied Harrow.

At a word from him the mechanics started knocking out the pins that held the turtleback to the fuselage itself. In a moment, with Hickman helping them, they lifted the wood-and-linen cover off.

"Well, for the love of Mike," said Hickman in surprised tones. "What's this bag doing here?"

Crillon and Harrow, suddenly serious, untied a small canvas bag that was hung from one of the top cross-braces of the fuselage. Rex, as surprised as his observer, watched Snow untie the string around the mouth of the bag and turned it upside down. A dozen tins rolled out on the ground.

"Opium!"

It was a chorus—almost ludicrous in the different gradations of surprise and, in the cases of Harrow and Hickman, horror. A curious swarm of mechanics encircled the group and a few passing officers stopped to find out what was the matter.

Snow and Crillon quickly weighted the cans. They were all heavy. The top was pried off one, and the dark sticky substance inside told its own story. With one accord everyone looked at the two men from McMullen. Rex and George glanced at each other quickly. In the eyes of each was an unspoken question—and the swiftly flashed answer was satisfactory.

"Well, I'll be hanged!"

Lee's words were slow, almost gentle, but there was a curious change in his appearance.

He lounged against the fuselage as easily as ever, cigaret in hand. The half-mocking twist at the corners of his mouth was still there, but the wideset blue eyes, slightly narrowed, were blazing with what seemed like the reflection of some inner fire. There was a lot of recklessness—a kind of fierce joy of battle there. Hickman's face was merely a still-life illustration of horrified surprise.

Harrow touched the two flyers lightly on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, but you will consider yourselves under arrest," he said, his lined face very serious.

Rex grinned, although his eyes were still shining with that savage delight in pitting himself against he knew not what.

"Don't cry about it, pardner," he said slowly. "Of course those cans are news to us as well as to you, but you can't do anything else. Where do we go from here?"

"To the old man, I guess," replied Harrow. "Do you gentlemen wish to accompany us?"

Crillon and Snow shook their heads.

"We've got no jurisdiction here. We're just nosing around to help out. Of course you un-

derstand that a full report will be made, and that if the civilian authorities wish to press the matter, providing they are not satisfied with the action taken by the military, it will be taken up later," replied Crillon.

The curious crew of officers and men watched Harrow and the two border men start for the C.O.'s office. Harrow carried the opium, repacked in the bag. In some way the news had spread ahead of them, and as they traversed the wide concrete highway which ran between the row of hangars and the barracks and officers' quarters excited knots of officers and men met them every few yards.

"Good heavens, Rex, I'm afraid you boys are in a mess!" Harrow told them as they approached headquarters.

"Looks that way," replied George moodily. "Of course you know there is only one explanation, Rex."

Rex nodded. Harrow looked at them questioningly.

"You mean?"

"Fitzpatrick. It would have been easy for one of his men to get in the hangar last night and plant the stuff."

Harrow nodded.

"I thought as much. Of course we don't know much about what is happening down there, but a few seepings of gossip about the little tiffs you've been having with that old bird have filtered up this way. I hope you can convince the old man, Rex. Here's wishing you the best of luck."

"I'm trying," Rex returned gently. "George, we sure are the prominent boys around Donovan. Look at the reception committee!"

Twenty-five or thirty officers were grouped around headquarters building. That Rex Lee, who in a few months had become the most talked-of pilot in the South, should be caught smuggling opium was an event not lightly to be overlooked. Hickman, the Texan's chief aid in his most widely known flying achievement, was likewise a famous character around Donovan, although few of the Donovan airmen except the older group knew either one of the border men.

Major Schaffer, operations officer of the field, hurried down the walk to meet Harrow and his charges.

"For the love of Heaven, Rex, what have you been doing?"

"Carrying opium, they tell me, but they had to tell me before I knew it," grinned Rex.

"Going in to the colonel?"

"Yes, sir," replied Harrow.

The tall, lanky young major, who had a distinguished overseas record, put his mouth close to Lee's ears.

"Rex, tell me straight, as man to man. Do you know anything about this?"

Rex, his blazing blue eyes belying the easy carelessness of his manner, met the major's eyes squarely.

"Not a thing, major."

"Then you think that Dave Fitzpatrick is behind it?"

"I know it!" interjected Hickman as they mounted the steps.

The group of officers parted silently. A few who knew these two flyers spoke to them in half-embarrassed tones. All of them saluted the major.

"Harrow, when you see the old man, tell him that I would like to see him on this matter—that I have something of importance to say

concerning it," said the major in suddenly crisp phrases.

"Yes, sir."

Harrow disappeared into the adjutant's office, and in a few seconds came to the door of his own office, where he had left the three.

"The colonel wants to see you right away," he said. "Major Schaffer, he wishes you to come in at the same time."

The four officers, Major Schaffer in the lead, filed silently into the office of Colonel Mills. He was sitting at his desk, signing papers. He was a stocky, gray-headed man with a strong, square-jawed countenance and keen blue eyes that years in the Philippines and the Southwest had surrounded with a multitude of wrinkles.

The four came to salute, which the colonel returned negligently.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said, and went on signing papers.

He stole frequent glimpses at Lee from under lowered lids as he automatically spread his signature on document after document. For months gossip from the border had indirectly reached his ears about the man who was now

lounging easily before him, shirt open around his tanned throat and thick brown hair tousled from the wind. Both Rex and Hickman were oil-grimed and dirty, just as they had climbed out of their ship. They carried helmets and goggles in their hands.

Finally the colonel finished and leaned back in his chair, his eyes meeting Lee's squarely for the first time. The C.O. lit a cigaret, the while he appraised the Texan with puckered eyes.

"All right, Harrow," he said at length, his eyes shifting to the assistant adjutant's face.

Harrow told the story briefly and presented the bag of opium cans as evidence. A hum of conversation from the veranda of the small building reached the ears of the men in the colonel's office and two or three times the C.O. glanced up irritably. As soon as Harrow had finished he rang a bell, and Captain Peele, his adjutant, entered.

"Tell that bunch of gossips on the porch to get away from here," he ordered. "Headquarters is no officers' club on this field!"

The captain departed, and the colonel looked speculatively at Rex and Hickman.

"You flew with the air-mail, didn't you?" he inquired suddenly.

"Yes," replied the flyer.

"Had a good record, somebody told me. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hum. Well, what have you and your movie partner to say about this opium deal? It would have been bad enough if it had been only whisky. Did you people at McMullen get the order from Colonel Feldmore about carrying liquor?"

"Yes, sir," stated Hickman. "And neither Lee nor I know any more about how that opium got in our ship than you do!"

There was no mistaking the sincerity of the big observer's vigorous statement. Major Schaffer got the colonel's eye.

"Will the colonel give me permission to say a word?" he asked.

"Go ahead. I was wondering why you were horning in on this deal anyway," commented the colonel dryly.

The major smiled.

"Here is what I wanted to say, sir, in a nutshell. You may or may not know that Lieuten-

ant Lee here has twice come up against Dave Fitzpatrick. Anyhow, you know Fitzpatrick for the most powerful, unscrupulous man in the Southwest. Am I right?"

The colonel nodded.

"Well, for reasons too various to mention this uncrowned king of the border is out to get Lee. Captain Kennard, a very close friend of mine, has told me the whole story. What I was going to suggest, sir, was that Captain Kennard be brought to Donovan Field to present the case—I am sure it would carry more weight than if Rex—I should say Lieutenant Lee—told it himself. Personally, I have known these men some time, and through their C.O. I know them very well. I believe they are innocent. With Captain Kennard to give all the dope about how Fitzpatrick has tried to frame Lee before, I believe that we can convince you or a court martial of their innocence."

The colonel smoked contemplatively for a moment and then made his decision.

"This case is open and shut. If for no other reason than the complaints which have come to us from San Antonio—rather mysterious the way they suddenly started, too—we must take

every step to apprehend and severely punish any lawbreaker in the service. Nevertheless, I know Fitzpatrick, and I know good men—"

He broke off for a moment, his thoughts evidently far away. He threw away his cigaret impatiently.

"My mind is open on the subject. I'll have Captain Kennard wired to fly up here this afternoon. Unless the matter is satisfactorily cleared up, of course a general court martial is inevitable. As matters stand now, you must be tried. You men will consider yourselves under arrest. You will report to me at ten o'clock tomorrow morning in this office. Harrow, fix up quarters for them and notify the provost marshal. That's all."

CHAPTER III

"THAT SKUNK FITZPATRICK!"

THAT evening, obeying an order from Colonel Mills through one of his orderlies, Rex and Hickman reported to headquarters. They found there the colonel himself and Captain Kennard, who had flown in from McMullen during the afternoon. With them was Colonel Feldmore, Department Air Service Officer. He was a tall, spare man of middle age with a rough-hewn face and a wide reputation throughout the Army. He was known as one of the fairest men in the Army—but a bad *hombre* if somebody ran foul of him. And he never set out to accomplish the complete and lasting subjugation of a man unless he had good reason for so doing. He knew his own mind, and changed it for neither man nor devil.

The two flyers saluted their three superiors, and waited silently. Both were now in full uniform, from stock to boots.

"Sit down, gentlemen. We have called you

here for a complete discussion of the incident of this morning."

Colonel Mills stopped a moment as the noise of an automobile motor stopping in front of headquarters reached his ears.

"It is rapidly growing in importance. The newspapers tonight are full of it. It is something which for the good of the service—and I hope for your own good as well—must be plumbed to the bottom quickly. You realize, of course, what a blot on the service it has become already."

Heavy steps sounded in the hall.

"No, never mind, son. I'll just mosey right in," somebody said to the orderly outside, and then the door was thrown open unceremoniously.

Rex leaped to his feet as if he had been shot.

"Dad. How in the world—"

The gray-bearded giant in the doorway grasped his son's hand and pumped it enthusiastically.

"Just dropped in for a social call," he replied with a rumbling laugh.

His twinkling blue eyes, set in a face the color of mahogany, looked the flyer up and down

affectionately. The other four men were on their feet. For some reason none of them except Hickman appeared greatly surprised.

"Now, what have you been up to, you limb of the devil?" asked Mr. Lee, still holding his stalwart son's hand.

Rex was big, but his father dwarfed him. He was six four as he stood, and must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds without being fat. His huge black sombrero was pushed back on his head. His gray suit, soft white shirt and black tie were all of conventional cut, although a discerning eye might have noted that the shirt was silk and that the suit could not have been purchased for a cent less than a hundred dollars.

"Limb of the devil?" inquired Rex with a grin. "I've heard other people call you—"

"Don't get disrespectful," warned the old ranchman with his rumbling laugh. "What these here generals could do to you wouldn't be a patch on what your old daddy would accomplish when he got started."

"Excuse me. Colonel Feldmore, Colonel Mills, Captain Kennard, and George Hickman —my father."

Mr. Lee shook hands with them all. When he got to Hickman he stopped a moment, twisting his plentiful gray mustache while he took a good look at the observer.

"Boy, I'll swear I get weak-like every time I remember seein' those movies o' you climbing around one of these airplanes. I don't know what this mess of Rex's is that the captain wired about, but are you in it?"

George grinned.

"Up to the neck, sir," he admitted ruefully.

Rex glanced at the captain quickly. So *he* had got in touch with Lee senior, had he?

"Well, let's hear the lay," demanded the old man finally, easing himself into the biggest chair in the office.

In concise sentences Colonel Mills told of what happened that morning. While he was speaking Lee senior drew a package of brown cigaret papers from a capacious pocket, filled one of them with tobacco and rolled it in the twinkle of an eye. He lit it deliberately. It was almost ludicrous to see so huge a man with so diminutive a smoke tucked underneath the flowing gray mustache.

"I sent for you for a reason that I will ex-

plain in a moment," said Captain Kennard when the colonel had finished. "I didn't tell Rex because I was afraid he'd object. I did it on my own responsibility because I've heard a lot about 'Roaring Bill' Lee and I knew you could help us clear your son."

Mr. Lee removed the sombrero thoughtfully and placed it on the floor. His thick, iron gray hair stood up in terrifying disorder after he had run his fingers through it a few times. Holding the stub of his cigaret between his fingers, he turned and looked at Rex, who was sitting beside him.

"How about it, son?" he asked quietly.

Rex, his expression thoroughly serious for once, met his father's eyes squarely.

"I saw that stuff for the first time out here on the field, dad," he replied.

"Of course. Just asked you to have it on record."

He lifted himself to his feet, the other men watching him closely.

"Gentlemen, the idea of Rex's doing that is ridiculous on the face of it. I am not in the habit o' braggin' about how much I'm worth, but I rise to remark that I can sign a check

for a lot of money, and every nickel of it is this boy's whenever he wants it. He has always had all the money he wanted and could have had a sight more if he hadn't been too independent to take it. Taking all personal considerations out of it, why would he bother around with a couple of hundred dollars' worth of opium?"

The old man looked around the circle belligerently. Colonel Feldmore, smoking quietly with his chair tipped back against the wall, smiled to himself. He had heard much of Roaring Bill Lee.

"Now, George Hickman—"

"The same goes for him," stated Rex quickly. "We've turned down movie contracts as high as a thousand dollars a week, and George of course would have got most of it."

Captain Kennard nodded. He had seen the letters.

"It being settled in our own minds that these boys, not being complete and total idiots, wouldn't mess around and smuggle opium for what few dollars they could get—"

Roaring Bill interrupted himself suddenly and looked at the two colonels questioningly.

"Or maybe you don't agree. Speak up, colonel. What do you think?"

Rex was on his feet, the old half-humorous, half-mocking twist at the corners of his mouth.

"Dad, you're a good rancher and cattleman, but you don't know the Army. If we have the colonel's permission, Hickman and I will go."

"Very well," assented Colonel Mills. "Stay in your quarters for a while so that we can get you by telephone if we need you."

The two flyers saluted and went out. Mr. Lee watched them, his eyes twinkling. Colonel Feldmore nodded slightly, as if in approval at the tact displayed by Rex in withdrawing.

"Now, gentlemen, what is your open opinion about this deal?"

The ranchman was not to be dissuaded from the point at issue for even a moment. For the first time Colonel Feldmore joined the conversation.

"It is the opinion of both Mills and myself that the boys are innocent. In fact, we have stronger reasons for believing so than you will have until you hear what Captain Kennard has got to say, unless your son has written you regarding his dealings with Dave Fitzpatrick."

"Mammy Hannah! Has that son-of-a-gun of a boy o' mine been mixed up with Dave Fitzpatrick?" roared the old man in a surprised bellow.

"He sure has," stated the captain. "And—"

"Excuse me, captain. Before we tell you, Mr. Lee, the very peculiar state of affairs, I want to have you thoroughly understand this. No matter how firmly we, as men or Army officers, believe in the innocence of those two fellows, we cannot fail to press the charges unless they are quashed by incontrovertible evidence. We cannot simply say they are innocent—that they have been framed by a powerful enemy. Some Army men may have been lax about liquor. Civilians in San Antonio—a few of them—have raised a howl. A couple of ministers have mentioned it vaguely from the pulpit. To make things worse, a complaint to the commanding general of the Department was made, and strict orders issued. Finally, through some pressure, the Department of Justice horned in to help us out. They were on hand this morning when the ship from McMullen came in."

"If that skunk Dave Fitzpatrick is after

Rex, he's got the power to start wheels turning in San Antone," declared the ranchman, the wrinkles between his eyes deepening until the bushy white eyebrows almost met over his prominent nose. "Probably that bird Snow was in the plot. He'd bear investigating."

"I don't doubt that. But you see where we stand. We've got to put up or shut up!" said Colonel Mills, taking up the thread of his chief's remarks. "Unless we can prove the innocence of the two lieutenants, it's bound to be a nasty mess."

"You're right, colonel. Now let's get the lay on this Fitzpatrick stuff. Twenty years ago, gentlemen, when that cold, brainy crook was a cattleman, I caught him cheating in a stud-poker game at Palestine, Texas, and drove him out of the country. Since then he's become rich, I know, by every means known to man or devil. I've kind of lost track of his operations, but I know for a fact that he pulls wires down in that little Mexican joint he hangs out at that make at least one weak-backed, jelly-hearted, water-blooded nincompoop in Washington jump. Now, what about him and the boy?"

"Well, Mr. Lee," began the captain, "it's

really a case of the deeds of the father being visited on the children, according to the dope old-timers like sheriff Bill Trowbridge down at McMullen and Ayres of the Texas Rangers gave me. One time when Rex was bound for El Paso on a flying trip Ayres met him and gave him the news that Fitzpatrick was out to get him. Just what channels the news got to Ayres through I don't know. When Ayres found out that Rex was the son of Roaring Bill Lee he figured right away that Fitzpatrick wanted to get back at the man who had been the means of his own disgrace by trying to run his son out of the country under a dark cloud of suspicion.

"His actions have borne this out. He could have had Rex killed a hundred times, of course, by one of his gunmen. But there is nothing he has against Rex himself—there can be nothing. He tried one of his usual methods on him in El Paso—what he has done before to men whom he wanted to ruin. Three of his men—a Mexican, and two others named Searles and Beers—"

"Searles, eh?" interrupted Lee. "A good man gone wrong, let me tell you."

"Well, they got Rex into a poker game. Rex, through Ayres' warning, suspected the lay, but that infernal disposition of his to pit himself deliberately against heavy odds for the pure joy of taking a chance made him consent to play. He was watching closely for crooked work, and caught a switch in the decks. He got four aces pat, and figured that one of the others would have a straight flush to beat him. Everybody dropped out but him and Beers. Beers urged him to put in a couple of thousand dollars' worth of I.O.U.'s so that he could demand payment at once and prosecute when they weren't paid, I suppose. Well, Rex took a chance that Beers' straight flush would not be pat—he figured that would be too raw—stayed in the pot, and finally threw away one of his four aces and drew two cards, thus spoiling Beers' draw if he had an open end straight-flush which the two top cards on the deck would fill—either one of them, I mean. You see no one would figure Rex to do anything but draw one or stand pat."

A loud roar of laughter burst from the old ranchman.

"Did Rex do that? How much did he win?"

"Around twenty-five hundred, I think," grinned Captain Kennard. "Ransom, one of my observers, was there and helped Rex gather up the money at the point of a gun before the three crooks could squeal. You see what Fitzpatrick was probably figuring—to get Rex into debt, demand full payment, and perhaps through holding a club over his head drive him into doing something through which Fitzpatrick could drive him out of the border country and out of the Army in disgrace. Sort of crooked justice for what you had done to him, Mr. Lee."

"Dave sure got it plenty up around Palestine," agreed Lee. "Great Jemimah, but I'll bet that two thousand hurt the old snake worse than taking his right eye, long's he knew who the boy was."

The old man was still smiling delightedly as he digested the full perfection of his son's achievement. He looked at Colonel Feldmore with twinkling eyes.

"I taught that young sprig to play the great game of draw poker when he was eight years old, colonel, but I believe the child is father to the man!"

"Apparently he's no sucker at the game," laughed the colonel.

"Not by a long shot—never was!" declared the ranchman. "He raised a lot of Cain when he was around the ranch, but I reckon it taught him something—nothing like experience."

He rolled another brown paper smoke, and his seamed and lined face gradually became serious.

"What you've told me, captain, is news to me," he resumed at length, speaking slowly as if carefully considering his words, "and in spite of the boy havin' come out on the big end of the horn once or twice, it's a serious thing for any man to have Dave Fitzpatrick out to get him!"

The three Army men nodded agreement.

"It was easy for Fitzpatrick to work this deal, too," said Captain Kennard. "By getting acquainted with some enlisted man his own employee could easily find out stuff, and slip in the hangar at night to plant the opium."

Mr. Lee nodded.

"Of course everybody that's been around Texas much knows that he's in cahoots with every bandit from Villa to Rentaria, and that

he's got a gang of outlaws of every breed workin' for him up and down the border on his smuggling deals, but I'd give a pretty penny to know how many judges, bankers and Government men are under his thumb."

The old Texan's eyes were on the glowing tip of his cigaret, and there was a reminiscent gleam in them as he continued:

"It worries me about the boy, because if there's any man in the world Fitzpatrick has reason to hate, it's me, gentlemen. And if he's planning to get back at me through Rex, it's time for the old man to get busy, pronto. There's nothing too low and sneaking for Fitzpatrick, and likewise nothing too bold or bloody."

"I personally knew three men—two Army officers and a customs man—who got something on Fitzpatrick and bucked him. They didn't get anywhere, and furthermore they all left the country, in disgrace."

Colonel Feldmore nodded agreement with Mills' words.

Mr. Lee got to his feet as if he had come to a decision.

"I'm getting to work tomorrow to try and

clear this opium deal up. Not only that, but to clean Fitzpatrick up. He's been allowed to get away too long as it is. Funny thing how those things'll happen— a city will sit back and let a band of crooks run it for years and never get up gumption enough to throw 'em out. Makes me laugh to have New York and those towns laugh at Texas. Difference in circumstances, that's all. I've got a little influence around this part of the country, and I'm starting to use it. A hundred of Fitzpatrick's men have been caught, but never a time has the old rattlesnake himself been burnt. Now, gentlemen, how long are you going to give me to work on this before the boy is court-martialed? I wish he'd 'a' told me about this before!"

"That's the trouble with him," opined Captain Kennard. "Why, Mr. Lee, that young fool actually enjoys being in a mess! If there's anything in the world he'll go miles to live through it's a scrap of any kind. He's—"

"Chip off the old block," laughed his father. "Never got out o' hot water myself till I got married. There's nothing better than a good scrap, but when the boy goes up against Dave Fitzpatrick it's a cold deck right from the go."

"I know it, and I've got something to suggest," said the captain. "Rex is our engineer officer down at McMullen, and it would be a good thing for him to take the course at the Mechanics School, anyway. Inasmuch as this happening today shows clearly that Fitzpatrick is in deadly earnest about framing Rex, why wouldn't it be a good thing to order him up here, colonel, for that course, while he is awaiting trial? It would appear better in San Antonio, too, to have him right on the ground up here. Inasmuch as I think we all believe that it was Fitzpatrick who planted the whole deal, it's a dead cinch that he'll find ways to stimulate a continuous and loud bunch of protests if it appears that the case isn't being pressed. Rex will be away from the border, where Fitzpatrick's power is most absolute and where he would have every opportunity to plunge him still further into trouble, and his father here can start the wheels turning with a free hand. The idea won't appeal to Rex, but I think the world of that fellow and I know almighty well that Fitzpatrick'll get him just as sure as shooting unless we forget we're Army officers and look at it like men!"

The captain's plea was vehement and sincere, and both the other officers knew the truth of his words. Before they left the office that night it had been decided that Rex and George Hickman were to remain at Donovan Field, under orders, and that the time of their trial would be delayed as long as possible to give Mr. Lee a chance to use his wide power and influence to start things in motion to clear them from the charges.

"Understand, Mr. Lee," were Colonel Mills' parting words to the Texan. "As men we are behind you in what you believe; as Army officers, unless proof can be obtained to present to court-martial, we must press those charges and there isn't a chance in the world of the two boys' escaping, I'm afraid, unless we can find something that will convince others of what we are already convinced. If they got by the Army court martial, you know that a civilian jury will be waiting for them."

"I understand perfectly, colonel," stated Lee senior. "Leave things to me. I'll trim Fitzpatrick again like I did twenty years ago, or my name isn't Lee."

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE AHEAD

It was two weeks later when Rex, working busily in grimy overalls, was told that Major Stratton, commanding officer of the Mechanics School, wanted to see him immediately. Carruthers, officer in charge of the course for engineer officers, brought Rex the message. Lee was hard at work putting together the internal workings of a torn-down Liberty motor. The Mechanics School believed that for every lecture on the theory of motors there should be many hours devoted to getting the hands dirty and learning by actual experience before battling with the forces of the air.

"Good Lord, Carruthers, have I got to mosey down and clean up right now?" inquired Rex disgustedly.

"Unless you want to interview the major in that spiffy suit of coveralls," replied Carruthers, who was a slight, good-looking fellow with a pair of sparkling brown eyes and a

flashing smile that helped to make him one of the most popular men on the field.

He had been a senior in a prominent engineering school at the start of the war, and incidentally held one or two New England Intercollegiate records on the track.

"They may not be the glass of fashion," agreed Rex, carefully wiping and then wrapping up his tools, "but they're cool."

"I don't see why. They're so stiff with dirt you might as well be wearing a tin suit," retorted Carruthers. "I've got to report along with you, by the way."

"It's no hardship for you fashion plates in boots and breeches. Now we who labor with our hands—"

"Shut up and let's get started. I'll take you down to the quarters on the motorcycle so you can change."

Rex locked up his tools in a chest and then with Carruthers at his side walked down the long hangar, where dozens of students—commissioned and enlisted—were working busily under the guidance of instructors. Two lecture rooms at the far end were filled to overflowing with classes which were getting lecture periods.

The Mechanics School was the mechanic factory of the Air Service, and Major Stratton saw to it that production was fast and thorough.

Carruthers started the motorcycle and Rex folded up his long legs and eased himself into the sidecar. He showed no effect in his manner or face of the difficult two weeks that had passed since the discovery of opium in his ship.

In the Mechanics School itself, after the first day or two Rex had effortlessly established himself as a "real guy." His whimsical humor, lack of conceit, and above all his refusal to allow the fact that he was in confinement for an important crime to affect either his sense of humor or his attitude toward his work, speedily convinced the busy young officers of the School that regardless of the fact that he might be guilty he was an addition to the gang. He won their money at poker, flew their scout ships as they had seldom been flown before and refused to discuss the charges against him in any way. Furthermore, no amount of pumping could persuade him to launch forth into tales of his achievements on the border. As a result, the attitude of the

School's young men was expressed by "Slim" Evans a few days after they had all come to know the man of whom they had heard so much.

"He may be guilty or he may not," stated Slim around the mess-table one night when Rex was absent, "and personally I don't give a dollar whether he is or not!"

Which attitude Rex must have noticed, but if he did gave no indication that he realized his peculiar position among his brother officers. Right now he was wondering whether the wheels were beginning to move. Had Lee, senior, accomplished anything?

Carruthers sat and smoked while Rex quickly bathed and dressed. The young engineer, only a fair pilot himself through lack of opportunity to make flying his chief business in the Army, was secretly a profound admirer of the seasoned veteran who was one of his motor students. Being of a sensitive disposition, he realized better than most of the others just how much poise and cold nerve it took for the Texan to conduct himself naturally, and carve a niche for himself in the Mechanics School under the circumstances. Jack Carruthers was for Rex,

hook, line and sinker, and as they sped toward headquarters for the interview with the major he was almost hoping that it would be of such a nature as would give him an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty.

Both men waited with interest for the major to bring up the subject of the interview. For a moment, however, he insisted on discussing with Rex the advantages of a sideslip landing. He had seen him make a beauty that morning, and, unlike most high-ranking officers, the major was a real flyer himself, which meant that he was ready to discuss flying at all times when a kindred soul was around to discuss it with him.

Finally he came to the reason for asking the two men to report. "Captain Barrett, from Washington, took a ship from here to fly to the Corbett Ranch two days ago," he said. "We sent old Sergeant Correll along with him. Well, the captain got lost in a fog and landed near a town called Ausman, Texas, down on the Gulf of Mexico. It was muddy and he turned over on his back. Broke the prop, a wheel, jimmied up the rudder and various other minor injuries. The captain had to get back

to Washington, so he left Correll with the plane.

"We've got to send down a ship with the needed supplies, and two pilots, one to fly each ship back. Our officers are pretty busy, so I figured it would help us out if we could pull you out of school for a week—you would just drop down a class, you see—and send you as one of the pilots, Lee?"

"I'd sure like to go, major, but being a criminal—" drawled Rex with a rising inflection at the end.

The young major grinned.

"I know. Colonel Mills was a little afraid of doing it, but Colonel Feldmore said he was getting fed up on all the lambasting San Antonio was giving the Air Service in general and you in particular, and that I would send you no matter what anybody thought. However, we are going to make a concession to public opinion and appoint the other pilot—Carruthers, if he wants to go—technically your guard while you're away."

Rex shook his head doubtfully.

"He's so little, major. Think what a temptation I'd be under to escape!"

"Get tough with me and I'll show you," threatened Carruthers. "I'd sure like to go, sir," he added to the major.

"I thought you would—your job doesn't give you much chance for cross country work, and in addition your knowledge of motors may help Correll in fixing up the ship. It's been out there in the mud too long to be in good shape."

He reached over his desk and handed Rex a slip of paper.

"Here are all the directions for finding the field which Correll has picked out as suitable for you to land on. It's practically next to the place where the captain cracked up, and about a mile out of town. Ausman isn't on most maps—it's just a little place, I guess, but a branch line of the railroad that goes through Barnes City has just recently been put through, according to Correll. You can follow that railroad to Acacia, and from there the branch line to Ausman, which isn't on our maps. It's right on the Gulf."

"When do you wish us to start, sir?" asked Rex, folding up the paper and putting it in his pocket.

"Tomorrow morning. Johnson will give you a ship. Better take a Jenny with an H motor —no use of taking chances with one of these overbalanced DHs on a short trip. You can land at the Government field at Barnes City for gas."

The young major watched the two flyers go out, with a satisfied smile. He wondered whether Rex suspected that his C.O. had deliberately pulled wires to give him the trip. Mrs. Stratton was a Texas girl, and familiar with what the name Lee had meant in Texas since old Roaring Bill had first become a cattleman back in the eighties. Not that Mrs. Stratton could remember the eighties, but her father had many a tale to tell of the old days when he and Lee, senior, and a few other hardy souls had fought their way by main strength to a commanding position in the Lone Star State.

The major himself was not in charge of the most important single activity of the Air Service for nothing—he knew men and he agreed thoroughly with his wife that in all probability Rex was a victim of conspiracy. The C.O. turned back to his work in a righteous

glow—that assignment would mean something to Lee in more ways than one.

It did, and in more ways than even the major could possibly have in mind.

CHAPTER V

A FORCED LANDING

THEIR sturdy training-plane was well loaded down next morning when Rex and Carruthers took off. A propeller was wired to one wing, next to the fuselage. A spare wheel took up most of the available space in the undercarriage, tied between struts. A rudder was tied securely to the other wing, in such a manner that it did not rest on its base and twist out of shape. A suitcase holding the toilet kits and a change of linen for the two flyers was strapped next to the rudder. In the back cockpit a tool kit, extra spark plugs, new distributor brushes and other small, easily broken and vitally important parts of an aviation motor were stuffed beneath the seat.

It was a gray, cloudy day, although it was not cold and the clouds were high. The wind was blowing southeast from the Gulf, which meant that the hundred and seventy mile trip would be made in slow time.

As always when he was flying anything but the heavy, overpowered, unbalanced De Haviland, Rex felt carefree. The De Haviland is so infinitely more difficult to land safely in the event of a forced landing, due to its weight and high landing speed, plus the fact that its undercarriage is set too far back and the plane will nose up at the slightest provocation, that almost any other ship seems like "pie" to a pilot accustomed to De Havilands.

His map was fastened in front of him, tacked down on a map-board. At two thousand feet he picked up the railroad to Barnes City, throttled his hundred and eighty horsepower motor to 1,450 r.p.m., and flew southeast. There were plenty of large fields if the motor went bad, although water was discernible in many of them. It had rained the night before.

Barnes City, where they were to make the first stop, was the eighth town down the railroad, marked by a reservoir. The field, maintained by the Government as a landing place for cadets on their practice cross-country flights, was next to the reservoir.

They picked up the field without trouble, and Rex spiraled down slowly while he gave the

landing ground a careful scrutiny. There was a pool of water at one end, but otherwise it looked fairly hard. The approach for a landing into the wind was directly over the town. At a thousand feet over the town he cut the throttle to idling, and cocked up the Jenny until it was in an almost vertical bank. Top rudder started it to slipping down with very little forward speed. He leveled out at a hundred feet and glided slowly, dropping over the trees at the edge of the field and stalling down to the ground. A slow landing is good policy in a strange field—a small hump or a very shallow ditch may wreck a fast-landing ship. Townspeople could be seen standing in the middle of the streets watching the sight that never seems to lose novelty—an airplane in flight.

The field was short the way they landed—less than a hundred and fifty yards, but the slow landing caused them to stop rolling with half the space unused. Rex taxied to the edge of the road which ran by the field, and had just cut his motor when the gas truck from a garage which supplied Government ships with high-test gas came bouncing along the rough high-

way. It was a matter of only a few minutes to refill the half-empty gas and oil tanks, make out the necessary vouchers and get the ship cranked for the warm-up.

Carruthers placed a couple of sizable rocks under the wheels for blocks and then sat on the tail while MacDowell warmed the motor. At about eight hundred revs. it missed and backfired a few times, but quickly caught again and ran smoothly when he finally opened the throttle wide for a few seconds. Rex turned to Carruthers and nodded. The motor man crawled beneath the wings, picked out the stones and then climbed to his seat and strapped himself in.

Rex gave it the gun slowly. He was taking off toward the reservoir—it would be a cross-wind take-off, but it gave him the long way of the field and a Jenny is slow getting off the ground. For a moment the motor missed and then caught again smoothly. The ship left the ground and was twenty-five feet high as it reached the edge of the two hundred yard square reservoir. Rex threw it into a left-hand bank for a turn back toward the field. Without any warning one bank of cylinders cut

completely out and there was a loud report as the motor back-fired.

The reservoir was surrounded by trees and shrubbery. There was but one opening, scarcely twenty-five feet wide, directly in front of them. Like a flash Rex nosed down his ship and dived for the opening. There was no hope of getting over the tops of the trees. Carruthers, in the back seat, pushed up his goggles and protected his face with his arm, preparing for the inevitable crash.

Their wing spread was forty-seven feet—the opening little more than half that. Rex dived steeply for speed—he was skimming the water twenty yards away from the aperture in the trees. One bank of cylinders lent them a little aid. As he sped closer to his goal he took the desperate chance that he had decided on an instant after the motor's failure. He banked steeply, his ship so close to the ground that the lower wing tip was barely a foot above the earth. The tiniest slip—which seemed inevitable as the ship lost speed—would cause the wing to catch the ground.

The banked ship curved through the narrow opening, and with all the flying sense the years

had given him Rex fought to keep it in the air. They were scarcely through the screen of bushes when he jammed the stick over the other way to bring it back to level. He was just too late—the right wheel hit the ground first and they bounced eight feet, cocked up to the right and almost stalled in the air.

With the instinct of a born flyer, however, Rex anticipated the action of the ship and had pushed the stick forward almost before the bounce occurred. He caught the ship in time, and it landed correctly instead of nose-diving the eight feet, which it would have done had there been a split second's delay in nosing down when the ship bounced. Had it reached the height of the bounce before the action of the controls caught it, flying speed would have been completely gone.

The whole maneuver had taken about five seconds, and had been a series of instantaneous decisions, any one of which meant the difference between a wreck and possible safety. The ship stopped rolling a few feet from an irrigation ditch, one of several that cut the field. The wheels were an inch deep in the soft ground—had the ground not been so saturated

with moisture they would have rolled into the ditch and all Lee's efforts gone for naught.

Rex pushed up his goggles and turned to look at Carruthers.

"So this is Paris!" he observed.

Carruthers drew a deep breath.

"Excuse me if I seem to act peculiar," he replied with a deep breath. "But I was shaking hands with St. Peter and just let go."

As they climbed out of the ship a man came running toward them, leading a group of men, women and children from near-by houses who had heard the motor go bad.

"Can't take off in this field, if we can fix the ship," said Rex disgustedly. "Got to drag the thing back to the regular field someway. I wonder what got into the thing?"

"A carburetor jet completely plugged, I think," replied the motor expert, opening the door at the side of the motor cowling.

"I hope that's all. Say, that reservoir looks about as small as a pond now, but it sure made the Pacific Ocean look like a dewdrop when that bank cut, didn't it?" drawled Rex, manufacturing the inevitable cigaret as he watched

the breathless approach of a rapidly growing crowd of curious bystanders.

When they arrived Carruthers was busy with a jet wrench, removing the high-speed jet from the carburetor which fed the delinquent bank of cylinders. While Rex conversed with the gathering his comrade got out the jet, and discovered a piece of rubber tubing which had been sucked from one of the hose connections in the gasoline and had tightly plugged the tiny jet. It was removed easily by means of a piece of wire. In twenty minutes the restarted motor ran perfectly.

Rex cut the switches and climbed out.

"Now how are we going to get this ship around the reservoir to where we can take off?" he inquired of all and sundry. "I wonder what the chances of hiring about four good mules are?"

A big, sunburnt man in overalls and a Mexican straw sombrero expectorated a young cloudburst of tobacco juice before replying.

"I'm shy o' mules right now, but I own this field and I've got a tractor that might do the job. We got to cross a brook, though."

"Fine!" chorused the flyers. A tractor would simplify things immensely.

"We sure will appreciate your helping us," Rex told their benefactor heartily.

"It's all right—had a boy was a mechanic in the flying corps," returned the farmer. "From what he told me and what I've seen right around this field you flyers've got enough to tend to in the air without haulin' ships around on the ground!"

Soon the tractor came rolling along over the field and the tail of the ship was hoisted and tied to it. It was not all easy sailing, however, —two of the impromptu bridges that the flyers, aided by kind-hearted onlookers, built across the brook running into the reservoir promptly broke. It was after one o'clock when the ship was finally resting on the field, and the flyers gratefully accepted the invitation of Mr. Cole, their chief helper, to have dinner with him.

During the course of the hearty meal that stout, motherly Mrs. Cole served them her husband inquired—

"Goin' back to San Antone now?"

"No, we're trying hard to get to the city of Ausman, Texas," returned Rex, who was

stowing away hot biscuits with much gusto.

"Ausman, eh? That sure is a right funny town," observed their host. "Ever been there?"

"No—a fellow cracked up down there and we're after his ship," Carruthers told him.

"Somebody had a narrow escape from coming after us," stated Rex, leaning back with a satisfied sigh. "I wouldn't mind working like I did this morning as a steady diet if there were meals like this around."

Mrs. Cole beamed with pride at the compliment to her cooking.

"What's the matter with Ausman?" inquired Carruthers, offering Cole a cigaret which was rejected in favor of a huge corn-cob pipe.

"Nothing special. Just looks and seems funny. I was in there once trying to buy some cottonseed I heard a fellow down there had, and everybody down there seemed to be figurin' what I was doin' around the town. Made me feel like everybody was lookin' at me crossways. Drummers comin' through here said they never had sold anything to the big store down there—sometimes a new man goes over

from Acacia, but he soon gets cured. I never felt so much like I'd butted in on a party where I wasn't invited in my life."

"Well, with a little luck I guess we'll get in and out fast," stated Lee, rising from the table.

"Maybe you won't want to," laughed Cole, refilling his big pipe. "I was only there a few hours, but I smelt a lot of breaths and they was sure strong enough so you could hang a hat on 'em. Hooch flows free in that town, or I'm a liar."

The two flyers made their adieu and departed after thanking Mr. and Mrs. Cole profusely for their kindness. As they walked the few hundred yards to the field Carruthers remarked:

"Sounds like Ausman might be a little more interesting than the average Texas town. If it is, it'll be the first good town I ever got into via the air. Every time I get stranded I find it's one of those movies-once-a-week places."

"If the demon rum is prominent there, you're going to have a job to hold your prisoner," returned Rex.

"Go ahead. If you haven't learned not to

fool with contraband goods by this time, you're a hardened criminal and beyond redemption."

It was the first time Lee's status had been alluded to, even in joking vein. Although neither man betrayed his feelings, the facetious conversation had a sobering effect. During those last two weeks Rex, almost without realizing it, had been gradually changing his attitude. All his life he had met—even courted—danger, a contest of any kind, with a queer kind of delight that was a part of him.

He had deliberately walked into Fitzpatrick's net at El Paso for the pure joy of pitting himself against a powerful enemy, and outwitting him. Once again, when Fitzpatrick had nearly succeeded in robbing him of an invention which he and Sergeant Cary of McMullen had developed, he had outwitted his powerful enemy.

Now, as they silently approached the ship, he had commenced to realize something of the relentless enmity, the cold, implacable purpose of the man who was the most feared influence on the border. Carruthers' light words had brought home to him once more the fact which no one realized better than himself—that one

Rex Lee was under the shadow of a menacing cloud that bid fair to engulf him.

Unless his powerful father could succeed in running to earth proof enough to show beyond question of a doubt that the apparently open-and-shut evidence of the opium-laden ship was the work of Dave Fitzpatrick, his Army career was done and there might be a couple of years at Leavenworth.

It was incongruous that full realization of what he had to fight should come to him right then, he reflected, but as he climbed in the cockpit and switched on the ignition to start the motor he failed to underestimate the odds against him for the first time in his life.

Which was something that would have caused great satisfaction to Captain Kennard, back at McMullen, who knew Lee better than the reckless young Texan knew himself.

CHAPTER VI

REX TO THE RESCUE

TEN minutes of flying proved that the motor was in excellent condition once more, so Rex decided to lop off a few miles of the trip by flying in a straight airline, leaving the railroad. It went straight east for forty miles and then bent sharply southward to Acacia. Ausman was southeast of Acacia. The map showed a small river which would serve as a landmark on a straight course for their destination.

It was a deserted strip of country, that fifty miles. One tiny group of buildings, probably belonging to a ranchman, was the only evidence of human habitation that the two airmen could discern. At intervals herds of cattle could be seen, standing out sharply in the clear air, even from five thousand feet.

Finally the river bent northward, and there was no landmark to guide them. Rex flew due southeast by his compass. As the flying-time from Barnes City grew to fifty minutes and

then an hour Rex scanned the country ahead anxiously. The railroad running south of Ausman should be in sight by then—the Gulf itself only a few miles farther on.

A white streak ahead became visible. It was a highway, running almost north and south. It was evidently the highway which approached Ausman from the south. He had drifted too far to the south while flying without landmarks on the ground to guide him. Perhaps the prevailing wind at five thousand feet had been from the north and blown them off course. At any rate they could not be far from their goal. Ten miles farther eastward the waters of the Gulf could be seen shimmering through the light ground haze.

He banked around to follow the road northward. It was wide, and looked as if it was smooth and level. It was probably a boulevard used by the big summer colony at Corpus Christi, many miles south, for automobiling.

As he flew above the road he noticed two automobiles, coming from opposite directions. The one going north toward Ausman was traveling very fast. The other car, a much smaller one, was proceeding slowly. Both Rex and

Carruthers watched the two cars idly. It was pleasant to have some evidence of inhabited country after the long jaunt over the trackless, lonesome wastes they had just traversed.

As the two cars approached each other the fast-running one did not slow down. Like two toys they sped toward each other, and the flyers watched helplessly as they saw the smaller car skid, topple and finally turn over beside the road. The big car had collided with it.

Rex cut the throttle half-way and dived recklessly for the ground. The wires screamed with the speed, but not until the struts were shaking and the whole ship vibrating wildly did Rex pull up the nose for a minute to reduce it. Then he cocked up the ship in a vertical bank and with full top rudder sent it into a wicked sideslip that made them drop like a stone. The wind blew his goggles around with its force and he was compelled to hold them in place with his hand.

In the back seat Carruthers had his eyes glued to the nasty-looking wreck below. The big car had stopped and the figure of a man could be seen approaching the mangled little victim of his reckless driving. There was not

any sign of life from beneath the wreckage.

As they sped earthward Rex looked anxiously for a place to land. The country was swampy and isolated clumps of bushes effectually spoiled any of the open places for airplane-landing purposes. The pilot hoped that the big car was all right, and that he would not be forced to land, for prospects were very bad.

They were only fifteen hundred feet high when he felt Carruthers' hand gripping his shoulder. He turned, and Carruthers pointed down excitedly.

"A woman," were the syllables his lips formed, and Rex stuck his head far over the side of the cockpit, holding his goggles to prevent their turning in the terrific air blast generated by the dive.

Sure enough, the figure of a woman in some sort of a white blouse was discernible now, and the man seemed to be simply standing beside her. Certainly he was not trying to help her.

It was a layout that demanded a little investigation, Rex decided, but where on earth could he land with any chance of safety? There was not a possible place, unless—

He scanned the road keenly. There were

no wires or trees to hinder, and it was plenty wide enough. The few bushes seemed to be far enough back so that wings would clear them. Instantly he decided to risk it.

A half-mile back of the two cars he was directly over the road, a hundred feet high. He cut the throttle completely, and glided slowly. The southeast wind started to lift him a little, so he nosed into it and came down with his ship pointed slightly diagonal to the wide, straight highway. One comforting thing in his ticklish job was that the ditches alongside the road were eight feet from the edge of the road proper, and apparently very shallow.

Carruthers, despite his realization of the difficulty of what Rex was attempting, felt as safe as if he had been in church, as he afterward expressed it. Somehow or other he had abounding confidence in the man who was piloting him—more than he would have had in himself, which is the highest compliment one pilot can pay another. Probably fifty percent of flyers refuse absolutely to ride with anybody but themselves at the stick.

Rex almost stalled his ship five feet from the roadway. As it dropped he kicked the rud-

der so that the nose was pointed directly down the road. Although they hit hard, it was on three points and they did not bounce. Peering ahead with his head over the side to give him better vision, Rex worked his rudder desperately to keep the ship going straight as it lost speed and the controls began to become ineffective.

He was lucky—when the ship started to come to a stop it did not take a notion to deviate from its straight path. Had it started to turn, he would have been forced to turn on the throttle to make the controls effective, and if they had not worked immediately the extra speed would have meant a crack-up in a ditch.

They had scarcely stopped rolling a few hundred yards from the cars, when Carruthers was out of the cockpit. He grabbed the left hand wing, out at the end, and walked along as Rex taxied slowly forward. By alternately pulling or pushing on his wing Carruthers helped keep the plane rolling straight, and in a moment they were close by the heap of torn metal that represented the woman's car.

Rex left the motor idling and followed Carruthers at a run. The man was now kneeling

alongside the woman, who was stretched partly beneath the wreckage. He swayed a little as he leaned over her, his back to the approaching airmen.

As they came up to him he turned and looked up. Apparently he was either a Mexican or a half-breed. He was stout, with a dark, full face that was now flushed with liquor. It was a girl who was stretched unconscious on the ground, and her shirtwaist and skirt were torn and dirty. Carruthers grabbed the drunkenly leering Mexican by the collar and jerked him to his feet. He drew back his foot and with all the strength he had sent the man sprawling with a well-placed kick. Rex bent over the girl anxiously. An ugly clot of blood on her head might mean almost anything, but the limp, unnaturally bent arm told its own story. It was broken.

He looked up in time to see the Mexican, who was dressed flashily, climb to his feet. His face was contorted with drunken rage. He started for Carruthers, tugging at a gun in his hip pocket. He did not notice Rex as the flyer leaped for him. A crashing blow behind the ear sent him to earth once more, and this time

he lay still. Rex abstracted his gun and rolled him to the side of the road.

"Thanks, Rex," said Carruthers briefly.

"Her arm's broken and she may have anything from a fractured skull to just a bruise on her head," stated Rex, as they bent over the victim of the accident.

She was very young and more than ordinarily good looking, although now the oval face was chalk-white beneath a tumbling mass of auburn hair that shone like fire in the sunlight.

Carruthers wet his handkerchief with water from the ditch and carefully washed away the blood from the girl's head. It was starting to clot over an ugly gash just over her left ear. Apparently, however, the wound was not serious, but the misshapen arm was pitifully obvious.

"I feel as helpless as a baby!" groaned Carruthers. "How far are we from Ausman, anyway?"

"About fifteen miles, I think," returned Rex. "We've got to get her back some way. If that spig's car is all right, you can drive her to Ausman."

"Had we better try to bring her to?"

"I don't believe so. That arm will probably give her a lot of pain if she comes out of her faint, and we might as well let her alone. I'll take a look at the car."

Carruthers, who had the girl's head in his lap, bandaged the cut on her head while Rex started for the car. He was doomed to disappointment. One wheel was crazily askew and two blown tires showed that the big machine must surely have skidded after hitting the other car.

"Nothing doing," yelled Rex as he came back. "I wonder if anybody ever drives along this God-forsaken pike?"

"Apparently not. But we've got to do something, Rex."

"Your words are true as gospel, me lad, but starting from there—what?"

He looked at the girl speculatively and then at the softly idling ship. Carruthers caught his unspoken thought.

"Could we fly her in, do you think?"

"I believe we could," decided Rex, his eyes on the road that stretched away as straight as a string for miles. "You'd have to hold her in, though."

"What about landing? My gosh, if anything should happen—"

"I've got full directions for the field, and old Correll knows enough to pick a good one. It hasn't been raining here since yesterday, either. Probably he'll be out to meet us in a car, and we can rush her to a doctor."

"All right—let's go."

Carruthers gently eased himself away from the girl and propped her head on a cushion which Rex supplied. They ran for the ship and each took one side of the tail. They lifted it a few inches off the ground and carefully swung it around, careful not to raise it too high, for in that event the revolving propeller would hit the ground. When it was pointed down the road they came back to the girl.

"What do you think about a sling for that arm?" inquired Rex. "I believe it ought to be bound up, too."

They finally took two pieces of board and bound her arm in a rough splint. Rex ripped off his O.D. shirt and made a sling out of it. The girl stirred as they were applying the rough surgery, but apparently did not regain consciousness.

They slipped Carruthers' O.D. shirt over the girl's head, putting only her uninjured arm through a sleeve. They had just completed the operation when her eyelids fluttered and opened and a pair of big hazel eyes looked up and met Carruthers' brown ones with startled inquiry. Before she could speak a spasm of pain twisted her features.

"Oh—my arm!" she said faintly.

"It got pretty badly hurt in that crash," replied Carruthers. "Don't try to move it at all."

"Take care of her while I yank the stick out of the back seat," Rex told him. "With two of you in there that stick wouldn't move a foot."

The girl's eyes followed the tall flyer as he strode rapidly toward the ship. Then they returned to Carruthers' face.

"You landed when you saw the wreck?" she asked.

Her face was very white; but she gave no other indication of pain.

"You bet we did—and we're going to get you to a doctor by airplane, too," rejoined the Army man.

He smiled engagingly as he looked down at

the face that was turned upward to meet his eyes. She smiled back, and then apparently for the first time noticed her peculiar wardrobe. Carruthers caught her puzzled questioning look and rapidly sketched the events of the past few minutes for her. He did not tell her about the fracas with the Mexican. He had just finished as Rex returned, his powerful shoulders and long, sinewy arms showing almost as brown as his face.

"We're ready to ramble, I guess," he stated. "How is the damsel in distress?"

"Fine, thank you," responded the girl with a crooked little smile.

Rex grinned appreciatively at the gameness displayed by the delicate-appearing young woman.

"You don't object to a ride in the plane, do you?" he asked as he and Carruthers lifted her gently to carry her to the ship. "The quicker a doctor gets hold of you the quicker that pain is going to stop."

"I think it will almost be worth a broken arm," she told them as they slowly walked toward the ship.

"Climb in, Jack, and I'll strap you," said

Rex, and held the girl in his arms as Carruthers loosened his hold and quickly climbed in.

As soon as he was strapped securely Rex lifted his burden over the side of the cockpit and lowered her into Jack's lap. Careful as they were, the girl's face went white with pain as Lee's arm stirred the sling. She leaned as far back as possible to avoid the possibility of jamming the controls in the rear cockpit. Carruthers had his hands locked around her, he himself held in securely by the strap.

Rex climbed into the front cockpit and strapped himself. Before starting he took another brief look at the directions Correll had sent for the field. It was marked by a big barn on one side and the mechanic would have a T constructed in the best part of the field. The wrecked ship would be in an adjoining field.

He slowly turned on the throttle. The takeoff presented much less difficulty than the landing on the road, because the ship would be going at top speed, and even on the ground would readily answer the controls. It was comparatively easy for him to keep it straight down the road by gentle use of the rudder, al-

though once he had to swerve slightly to avoid hitting a bush with his wing. Speed was picked up quickly on the hard surface, and they were safely off the ground in a hundred yards.

As they circled around toward Ausman Rex glanced down and saw the Mexican walking slowly toward the damaged automobile. The pilot watched his instruments with tense interest. He did not dare to let himself think of what a forced landing would mean. Even the road was not a possibility now, for the shrubbery seemed to be closer and the ditches deeper as they came in sight of a small village that must be Ausman.

They were fifteen hundred feet high, and as they came closer to town a big white T loomed up plainly. Rex blessed the wise old sergeant who knew that a T was the one best bet in landmarks from the air. The barn was there, too, and in another field the wrecked ship, now right-side up, could be plainly seen. Several cars were standing on the narrow little road that ran past the field, branching off the main pike.

As they spiraled down with half-throttled motor Rex flew more carefully than he ever

had before, striving to counteract the bumps in the air so that the girl would be jarred as little as possible. In the back seat Carruthers, holding his burden tightly, was indulging in silent pæans of praise and admiration. Scarcely once did the ship tilt sharply—Rex was literally catching it before it started. And in the blaze of the afternoon sun the air was in a highly scrambled condition as they came down to five hundred feet.

The field looked good. The portion where the T was located was apparently level and dry, although at one end of the long, narrow stretch a sizable pool of water could be seen. The smoke from Ausman chimneys was rising almost straight in the air, Rex noted, so the wind was of little consequence.

He circled carefully, well back from the southern boundary of the field and with his hand on the throttle started a very gradual dive. Imperceptibly the throttle crawled back farther and farther, the nose coming down slightly to compensate.

The shot for the field could not have been more accurate. They skimmed the fence at fifty-five miles an hour, and Rex leveled off

with his wheels almost touching the ground. He inched the tail back and landed as smoothly as down. It stopped opposite the line-up of cars, so it was only a short taxi to the nearest one. Rex looked around as he fed the throttle slowly, the ship barely moving across the ground.

The girl's face was deathly white below Carruthers' huge goggles, which obscured everything except the tip of her nose, her mouth and chin; but she managed a smile, nevertheless.

Correll was in the van of the group of people who had come to see the landing. Rex wasted no time in cutting his switches, smiling in spite of himself at the stark astonishment pictured on the faces of the dozen or more people who surrounded the ship. Correll, a huge, portly man whose massive legs looked like tree-trunks in Army breeches and leggings, was speechless.

"There was an auto wreck and we brought this girl in," said Rex crisply as he climbed out. "Will the person who has the biggest, easiest riding car volunteer to take her home and someone else to go for a doctor?"

"Why, it's Corrine Weston!" exclaimed a motherly-looking woman as Rex and Correll

lifted the girl out and removed her goggles. "I'll take her home, poor dear!"

"How far does she live from here?" asked Rex as they carried her to the big touring-car the woman was driving.

"About a mile—on the outskirts of town," she replied breathlessly, bustling wildly to get robes out of the way in the back seat. "I'm all alone—maybe one o' you gentlemen better come along to hold her and help her into the house. It isn't likely her daddy will be home."

"Go ahead, Jack. I'll be over to get my shirt back in a few minutes," said Rex.

Carruthers, who had been unconscious of his lightly clad condition, flushed red as fire, glancing quickly at the portly lady who was already at the wheel of the car. The little knot of curious people laughed at his dismayed expression.

"Land's sake, boy, hop in and don't be silly," said the lady. "I see where your shirts went."

As soon as Miss Weston and her caretaker were ensconced as comfortably as circumstances permitted in the roomy back seat she started the car slowly. Rex, who had been somewhat dubious as to whether she could

handle the car smoothly enough to avoid unnecessary pain to the injured girl, nodded approvingly. The big machine had started without a jerk.

"She'll do," he told Correll. "Has anybody gone after a doctor?"

"Jim Peebles went," volunteered a straw-sombreroed youth with a freckled face and bare feet.

"How did you get out here, sergeant?" asked Rex as they walked back to the ship.

"I've got a jitney here—that kid in the big hat drives me around a lot and is tickled to death at the chance," replied Correll. "What happened, lieutenant?"

Rex told him the story as they adjusted the canvas cover on the motor and propeller and staked down the tail and wingsides with the stakes Correll had provided.

"Was that spig a heavy-set, flashily dressed *hombre* driving an old model Roamobile?" inquired Correll when Rex had finished.

"Can't swear to the make of the car, but otherwise the description fits," drawled the flyer, leaning against the fuselage and rolling a smoke.

Correll glanced at the few people who were still watching them from the road.

"That would be Balovo, that runs a combination saloon, gambling-place and pool room," he said in low tones as he turned the cushion in the cockpits. "He's one of the big toads in this puddle—and an almighty peculiar puddle it is, too."

"So a fellow was telling me up at Barnes City," replied Rex, rubbing one hand reflectively up and down his bare arm. "What seems to be the lay?"

"Nothing special, except that it looks to be sort of a wide-open joint. It's a teeny little place, as you can see, but there's something funny about it. Awful lot o' spigs here, and hardly a single negro. Pretty rough sort of gang o' whites, and about half of 'em don't seem to be doing a thing to justify living. They hang around the main stem all afternoon and evening."

"Well, I guess we won't be here long. How's the ship coming?"

"Pretty well, but there's a lot to be done yet. Motor's still on the blink. It was on its back in that mud too long. We just got her

right side up yesterday, and the whole fuselage has got to be re-rigged."

"Well, we'll get at it bright and early in the morning. Is there a tractor to haul the thing out of that swamp and over here?"

"Nary a one. Have to do it by mules. Most of the people around here ain't so helpful, either. Do you want to go to Mr. Weston's house, lieutenant?"

"Yes—got to have my shirt. You haven't got a coat or anything out here, have you?"

"My coveralls," grinned Correll, and led Rex to the battered Ford which was the Air Service private taxi.

The coveralls proved to be not quite long enough and much too big around but they were better than nothing. Correll went back to the ship and got the suitcases.

The field was about a mile and a half from the center of town, and to the west. Mr. Weston lived a little farther out, his big white house nearly a quarter mile from its nearest neighbor, although a couple of small shacks were near by that might be inhabited. The house was discernible from some distance.

"This Weston seems to be the real wealthy

plutocrat of town," Correll told Rex as they bumped along the uneven little road that led to the highway. "He owns the big store—the only one in the town worth mentioning. He lends money, buys the crops of all these Mexicans, has the post office and hasn't got any competition, near's I can find out."

"He's got a lot of *dinero,*" volunteered the driver, spitting over the side of the car.

"Apparently they learn to chew tobacco young in this town," grinned Rex.

"Ye-ah—I been chewin' since I was a little tyke," stated the youth proudly.

"Who's your daddy?" inquired Rex.

"He runs the hotel," answered the boy.

Correll leaned over to whisper in Lee's ear.

"I've been the only guest since I been here. They don't grow fat keepin' a hotel in this town, and yet that's more than most of the white men seem to be doing. Lieutenant, this sure is a funny town!"

CHAPTER VII

REX SCENTS A MYSTERY

THE rattling little car rolled up the driveway, one of the most respectable lawns in that part of Texas showing green and level on either side. A few gnarled mesquite trees relieved the dead flatness. On the veranda was Carruthers, now arrayed once more in his wonted O.D. shirt, and another man. The big car which had transplanted them there was still standing out in front, as was also a runabout.

Rex climbed out and ascended the steps.

"How is she getting on?" he asked, his eyes on the face of the tall, extremely thin man who rose to meet him.

"The doctor is with her now. He says she's all right except for the arm," returned the civilian.

He spoke in somewhat breathless, hurried fashion far different from Lee's soft half-drawl.

"Rex Lee, meet Mr. Weston," cut in Carruthers. "And here's a shirt to cover your nakedness."

"Already covered. Glad to meet you, Mr. Weston."

The thin, bony hand which was held out to him was cold as ice. Mr. Weston met his eyes for just a moment and then turned away nervously. Although apparently still a man in early middle age, his hair was sprinkled with gray and the small mustache and Vandyke that he wore were likewise touched with white. He was dressed neatly in light summer stuff and a soft white shirt and white shoes. His Panama was hung on the back of his chair.

"Sit down, sit down, lieutenant. Mr.—er—Carruthers tells me that you're the man that used to be at McMullen."

"Ye-es?"

Lee's remarkably large, wide-set gray eyes began to glow strangely as he uttered that one word questioningly. The merchant's question had brought back to him in a rush just who he was, and the shadow under which he was living. He waited quietly for whatever Mr. Weston might have to say.

Their host smoked his cigar in spasmodic jerks for a moment, one foot tapping on the porch floor.

"Well, gentlemen," he said at length, "of course there is nothing I can possibly say to let you know how much I appreciate what you have done. It was splendid—splendid. If I could I would invite you here, but now that Corinne will be laid up, I don't see how I can—don't see how I can."

He jumped to his feet and began taking long, quick strides up and down the veranda.

"Lieutenant Lee, there's something I must tell you. I—"

Footsteps in the hall grew nearer, and the doctor's voice could be heard as he talked in low tones to someone with him.

"—her quiet today, and then tomorrow she'll feel better," he said, and stepped out of the door in company with the slight, white-haired little woman, who had kept house for the Westons since Mrs. Weston's death some years before.

The doctor, rather a hard-faced man but apparently genial enough, told Mr. Weston that his daughter could walk around in a few days

and that the injury to the arm was the only thing at all serious which had been caused by the wreck. Both he and Mrs. Talbot, who had driven Corinne and Carruthers from the field, treated Mr. Weston with evident respect.

"Did you say you had something you wanted to say to me?" asked Rex after the doctor and Mrs. Talbot had driven away.

Mr. Weston glanced nervously at the little white-haired housekeeper, who was chatting with Carruthers.

"Come down to the store," he said, his eyes gleaming somewhat feverishly.

"If you'll pardon me, I'll just step into the hall a minute and take off this flying-lingerie in favor of my shirt," said Rex to the little housekeeper during a lull in her conversation with Jack.

"Certainly, certainly, go right in," she said briefly and returned to her tale of the young girlhood of Corinne Weston.

Carruthers, Rex noted, was listening with what was certainly a good imitation of interest if it was not the real thing. Mr. Weston went around the house after his car.

When Rex came out the two flyers took their

leave, promising to call on the morrow. Their young chauffeur followed Mr. Weston's roadster to town, insisting on keeping so close that the dust came back on them in a cloud until Rex remarked:

"I'm aiming to drive over this road again tomorrow so I can take in some o' the scenery. Most of it's flying through the air right now."

"Ah, quit yer kiddin'," grinned the driver, and slowed up a trifle.

"Isn't much to see, at that," observed Rex.

They were still in the outskirts of town, and almost every habitation was of the shack variety. Round-eyed, dirty Mexican children watched them pass. The Mexicans' dwellings appeared to be located without any particular reason—few of them faced the road, and most of them were set in the middle of the fields.

"Mr. Weston is about as restful as a bomb explosion," said Rex to Carruthers in low tones. "I wonder is there something the matter with him or is that his natural state?"

"Search me, but he's as bad as a waltzing mouse. Seems to be nice, though."

"He's got a peach of a daughter to his credit, anyway. Hello, here's the village."

CHAPTER VIII

REX GETS A WARNING

They turned down the main highway, which was now bordered with fairly neat-appearing houses on the whole, although there were many in a more or less ramshackle condition. They were set wide apart, and through the intervals between them many of the unpainted little cabins of Mexicans could be seen in the distance. The town appeared to consist of a little nucleus of white people, surrounded by Mexicans who lived around the big, fenced fields that stretched away for some miles.

The highway, stretching north and south, ran within a few hundred yards of the gulf and parallel to the shore. About half-way down the village a road branched eastward, running to the edge of the Gulf of Mexico. Bordering this short street were the business houses, mostly one-story affairs with false fronts.

It appeared that every male citizen of the

town must be lounging on that street, from the number of men who curiously watched them draw up to a big square, two-story building with a road on either side that bore the sign:

JAMES WESTON
General Merchandise
Money loaned on crops
Post Office: Ausman, Texas.

"Mr. Weston wanted Carruthers and me to stop here a moment," Rex told Correll. "Is the hotel far from here?"

"No, right on down the street here. It's on the right-hand side, bang up against the water. There's a sign on it; you can't miss it. Suppose I take the grips down?"

"Good. And thanks, sonny, for the ride."

"Welcome," mumbled the boy, looking with admiration at the two flyers. Then the youth expectorated with much gusto and started with a jump for the hotel.

Mr. Weston was waiting on the porch of the store, chatting with some of the flannel-shirted, sombreroed men who were loafing there in various postures, all restful. Apparently they had all heard of Corrine Weston's airplane ride,

for Rex and Carruthers got a complete and leisurely inspection as they mounted the steps. The store was set back somewhat from the street, and was surrounded by a porch which was roofed only in the front. On the sides it served for a platform on which goods could be loaded.

"Come in, come in," said the owner, and led the way with his long, jerky stride.

The interior was very large, with four different rows of counters running three-quarters of the distance back. A partition ran across the whole width of the store, one door leading into a small store, and the other into what was apparently a store-room. Three or four youths, one of them a Mexican, were waiting on some customers. Every conceivable branch of merchandise was represented—crockery, clothing, groceries, gaudy house furnishings, and the like. From his experience with general stores in Texas, Rex Lee imagined that upstairs were stored agricultural implements, grain, and other bulky commodities.

They followed Mr. Weston back into the office. A huge safe was the most prominent part of its furnishings. An old-fashioned desk

and arm-chair, an antiquated filing-cabinet and two straight chairs completed the equipment. A window and a door opened into the back yard.

"Sit down, sit down," said their host, who seemed to have a habit of repeating himself when he talked.

He jerked off his Panama, hung it on a nail, seated himself and began tapping on his desk with his fingers. His sunken, over-bright eyes darted here and there, and he chewed his cigar rapidly.

"Lieutenant Carruthers, would you mind if I had a word with Lieutenant Lee in private?" he asked suddenly.

"Certainly not," replied the flyer, and got to his feet. "I'll—"

"Just a minute, please," Rex interrupted. "Mr. Weston, if I'm wrong correct me, but I have an idea that what you are going to say relates somewhat, perhaps, to certain peculiar things connected with me. If so, I would like to have Carruthers present."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. You are right, quite right. But er—I was asking more for my own sake than yours, lieutenant."

He leaped to his feet and paced the floor rapidly, pulling nervously at his Vandyke.

"Oh, well, in that case—"

"Never mind, never mind," interrupted the storekeeper with uplifted hand. "Doesn't make much difference."

He closed the door with a bang and then leaned close to the two flyers. His eyes, a hunted, furtive light in them, burned into Lee's.

"I shouldn't say this—shouldn't say it. It would be most horrible if a living soul beside you two ever knew that I have said it. But I must—I must. Lieutenant Lee, get away from Ausman. Get away right away. Believe me, you must."

"May I ask why?" drawled Rex, lounging easily in his chair, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Mr. Weston.

"No. I can't tell you. It's a friendly warning."

Once again he started that nervous pacing, his face working. Apparently he was under some terrific strain, for he was completely unstrung.

Rex climbed to his feet slowly.

"Thank you, Mr. Weston," he said slowly, his eyes never leaving the merchant's face. "I think I am getting a glimmer of what you mean. If I'm right—"

"No, no, I can't tell you! You mustn't ask me, indeed you mustn't! You don't know what I am risking in even—"

"Don't worry, Mr. Weston," Rex cut in, his voice more gentle than usual, as was always the case when he felt that a contest of any kind was looming before him. "Whatever I think I know is mostly the result of what has happened before I came here, and it only needed an inkling of some kind for me to jump to conclusions. I'm on my guard, and nobody's going to know what woke me up, in case something happens. Any acquaintance between us is the result of whatever we were able to do for Miss Corinne. Good afternoon, and thanks."

Carruthers was agog with curiosity and pleasant excitement. Little as he knew of the circumstances surrounding Lee's arrest for carrying opium and his previous escapes from unpleasant entanglements along the border, he felt in the cryptic conversation he had just

listened to an undercurrent of meaning which seemed to indicate that wider forces were at work than were compassed in the straggling little town of Ausman. Nevertheless, he did not ask any questions, but walked down the sun-scorched street as silently as Rex himself.

They were opposite the open doors of what appeared to be a large soft-drink place, fitted up exactly like a saloon, and Rex glanced in. A number of men were standing along the bar, and two or three of them looked out at the flyers. One man turned his head back quickly. In the dim shadow of the place his face was but vaguely defined, but as they walked on Rex strove to place what had appeared like a familiar face.

"Now where in thunder!" he said aloud, slapping his thigh with the helmet he carried in his hands, his thoughtful gaze on the sidewalk.

He did not finish what he had started to say so Carruthers inquired:

"Where in thunder what?"

"By the mighty, Beers!"

"You sure have been talking Fiji the last few minutes," complained Carruthers. "There

are no beers nowadays, Rex. It's hot enough—"

"Jack, we've fallen into something!" stated Rex, his gray eyes alight with the leaping dancing flame that gave the lie to his outward air of lounging ease.

"What's the deal, Rex?"

"Listen, Jack. It's bound up, I believe, with the things that have been happening to me for some months past. The last shot was the opium deal at Donovan. What Mr. Weston hinted at has almost been labeled by the man I just saw in that place down the street. Unless I'm badly mistaken, I'm due for another session with my friend, Dave Fitzpatrick, although just what the lay is I don't know. If you don't mind I'm going to shoot off my face a little to you and Correll, because if Fitzpatrick tries to work on me here you two are liable to be roped in on it, just the way George Hickman is in the soup with me right now. I'm going to give you all the dope I've got, and you can use your own judgment. Heaven knows I don't want you two caught in the net."

"Rex, I'd give my little finger for a good scrap with the old geezer. I don't know why

on earth you should be afraid of him here, though. This is a long way from his hangout, isn't it? But if you really have got some reason for thinking he's got influence here, why not beat it, old man, and avoid getting into further trouble? Good gosh, man—"

"That's not it, Jack. Boy, I'm sure watching my step. But I'm figuring that maybe, by hook or crook, if I could get next to the deal down here I might just hop on to something that would help clear up this mess they've got me in right now on this opium. But let's rope in the sergeant and collect all the cards so you'll each have a good look at the deck before you decide to horn in on the game. I hope you won't."

They had been standing on the walk in front of the large white house which bore the faded sign "Ausman House" as its only mark of being a hotel. It faced the street, the waters of the Gulf only a hundred feet from one side of it. A steep bank fell off sheer from the level of the town to the water, fifty feet below.

They had just started up the walk when the burly figure of Sergeant Correll emerged from the doorway.

"I've got your rooms," yelled Correll. "Your suitcases are up there now."

"Thanks. Come here a minute, will you, sergeant?"

Correll joined them and they walked slowly to the edge of the bank, where they stretched themselves on the grass. As briefly as possible Rex sketched his experiences with the uncrowned king of the border. He told them how his father had been the means of Fitzpatrick's disgrace and exile years before, and how Fitzpatrick had tried to use his immense influence and power to revenge himself on Lee, senior, by entangling Rex himself in some criminal thing that would result in his being disgraced and his life ruined.

"The point is this," Rex told them, puffing slowly on a cigaret as he gazed across the waters of the Gulf into the mist that veiled the water several miles out. "I just saw one of the men who were in that crooked poker game in El Paso, when Fitzpatrick tried to get me a couple of thousand dollars in debt so that he would have a hold on me. Hitch that up with Mr. Weston's warning, and I have a hunch that the answer is that for some reason or other

Fitzpatrick has a hold on this town. Seems far-fetched, but I'm hanged if I don't believe it!"

Correll had been following Lee's narrative closely, nodding agreement from time to time. He spoke now for the first time since Rex had started talking.

"Lieutenant, I was a cavalryman for twenty years before I joined the first aero squadron the Army ever had," he stated, "and about twelve of them years I spent along the border. You can't tell me nothin' about Dave Fitzpatrick that I won't believe—if it's bad. It ain't impossible at all that he's got a finger in this Ausman pie. He runs ninety percent of the crooked work from San Diego to Brownsville—I know that for a fact. Just what he could use this town for—"

"We may be able to figure that out," said Rex. "Now, here's the meat on the end of the stick. He's got me roped now on this opium deal—the newspapers have seen to it that I became known as an opium-carrier, and I'm in a mess right now. But, if Beers is here as Fitzpatrick's man, and if Fitzpatrick runs the powers that be in this town like he does a lot of border towns, I'll be mighty mistaken if he

doesn't try to make assurance doubly sure by roping me tighter while he's got me here. Another scandal for one Loot Lee would just about finish the beans, wouldn't it?"

"Sure would," agreed Carruthers.

Correll nodded slowly.

"Well, enough of that. I just wanted to warn you fellows to watch your step, and don't get mixed in with any trouble that may come along. I—"

"What are you plannin' to do, yourself, if you don't mind me askin'?" asked the grizzled old sergeant, his keen eyes fixed on the clean-cut features of the Texan.

"I'm planning to watch my step, just like I advised you, but I'm going to keep a weather eye out for picking up anything that may put a crimp into not only any game that may be started here, but maybe—just maybe, mind you—I might get hold of something that would help clear me on this opium scrape."

Rex didn't know it, but in the expression of that determination to stand by his job at Ausman despite the possibility of another run-in with the tremendously powerful and unscrupulous enemy who had already placed him with

his back to the wall, he clinched the feeling of respect and admiration that had already begun to develop in the mind of hard-boiled old Sergeant Correll. And the sergeant was an ally not to be despised.

"I'm satisfied to stack in with you if there's trouble, lieutenant," he said.

"You know me, Rex," put in Carruthers.

"Thanks. I suspect we may be making a mountain out of a mole-hill—somehow or other it doesn't seem possible that old Fitzpatrick would have his claws in very deep way up here. I almost hope he has, and that he shows his hand. Dad is busy, as I told you, but it's going to be a long pull before he finds out anything that will clear me of having a few hundred dollars' worth of opium in my ship. It might just be possible that I could get hold of somebody here who would know the rights of the deal and I could choke the truth out of him."

"I sure hope so, lieutenant," said Correll, meditatively chewing a blade of grass as he talked, "but as near as I can figure there isn't any one man that knows a quarter of what Fitzpatrick is up to. He's got most of the ad-

mitted bad men and a lot of camouflaged crooks in white collars working for him up and down the border, but each of 'em knows only his section of some particular smuggling deal or whatever it is."

"Most of the white-collar boys are men Fitzpatrick has framed, aren't they?" inquired Carruthers.

"Yes, sir. I only know one that I could put my finger on—he was a Customs man that lost a bunch of dough over to Juarez one night and fell for a bribe the next day. He got caught, but he was so scared o' Fitzpatrick that he wouldn't tell a thing. It's like all the rest of the rustlers, smugglers and half the killers they've got through the Big Bend—not a one of 'em will talk when they get caught. Fitzpatrick sure has 'em buffaloed."

"Well, let's go and wash up," said Rex coming slowly to his feet. "How are the meals at yon palatial hostelry?"

"Pretty good. And say, lieutenant, the more I think of this town the more I think maybe we ain't far off in keeping a weather eye on our old friend Fitz. I told you it was a funny town, and I'm getting a Nick Carter theory in

my head that may be shootin' near the mark!"

The sergeant was undoubtedly serious in what he said, and he met Lee's quizzical gaze without smiling.

"What's your idea?" inquired the Texan as they strolled around the house—it was more of a house than a hotel—to the front door.

"I'm going to let you have a look at the town for a night before I tell you—then it won't sound so foolish," grinned Correll.

CHAPTER IX

"WILD WEST" MURDER

THE "Bogie Bill" show was a Texas institution. Where Bill Drumm got the name Bogie tacked on to his cognomen nobody seemed to know, but as Bogie Bill's show his outfit had played through the small towns of the Southwest for years. All the old-timers were familiar with it, and in countless small towns his coming was looked forward to as one of the leading events of the year, rivaling in importance a county-seat barbecue, baseball championship game and band concert combined.

He ran an old-time wild west show, pure and simple. The show carried a string of twenty or more horses, mostly either natural or trained buckers, and he always managed to have at least a couple of outlaws that were really tough medicine for the best of riders. He carried eight or ten riders and ropers, the number varying greatly according to the personal idiosyncrasies of the performers, who

were all cowhands who wanted to try something new. Drumm's daughter Maisie was heavily billed as the world's champion woman rider, roper and shot, and to an unprejudiced eye the claim was not greatly exaggerated, although so far as anybody knew, Maisie had no official right to the title.

A small carnival which included a great variety of side-shows always traveled along with the show, and owing to the wide acquaintance of Bogie Bill his show usually took on the aspect of a town fair. The Forty-nine Girls, Fatima, the Fat Woman and a few midgets had been institutions with the show ever since it started. It might be added that a number of too skilful card players and other light-fingered gentry had traveled along with Drumm for so many years that everyone in Texas should have known them, and in fact a lot of people did. Nevertheless, when the show was in town it appeared as if "everything went" in good old Western style.

Some few days before the arrival of Rex Lee in Ausman the show pitched its tent in San Antonio, less than a mile from the eastern entrance of Donovan Field and about three miles

from the center of the city. It had been a long time since Drumm had essayed a big town, and apparently the chance was a good one, for at eight o'clock every seat was full and the side-walls had been rolled up to allow standees to peek through the aisle spaces at a quarter each.

The carnival side-shows were doing a rushing business, and the hoarse cries of the barkers split the air with raucous sound that almost drowned the wheezes and groans of a couple of hurdy-gurdies. Flaring gasoline torches illumined the grounds fitfully.

The show was in three sections. The first section consisted of fancy riding of all descriptions, done by Bogie's staff of riders and climaxed by the work of his daughter Maisie. Then there was roping and fancy shooting, and finally the big feature of the show—the riding of bucking ponies. The grand finale was an attempt by every rider in the outfit to stick on the two outlaws, and a standing reward of fifty dollars in gold to anyone in the audience who could stay on "Sunfish," a mangy, bony old war-horse who was named for his polished and unusual ability at performing that well-known maneuver.

The first section was well under way, and Bogie Bill, a squat, jovial, red-faced old veteran of the West, was rubbing his hands gleefully at the interest the show had aroused in San Antonio. He saw a solid week of good business at the one stand, if his luck held and he got good weather breaks.

It was "Blackie" Stearns' turn to show, and for some reason he did not appear on the little black pony. As the wait became longer Drumm's face grew dark. Stearns had caused him trouble before—he wondered whether he had got hold of liquor again.

He was starting back for the horse tent when finally the flaps separating the canvas corral and the main tent opened and Stearns appeared on Black Bess. He was extremely tall, long legged and broad shouldered, the appearance of his rather handsome face spoiled by a deep frown that seemed to be ever present. Drumm noted with rising wrath that there was a flush on his rider's face tonight that bespoke indulgence in John Barleycorn.

As he entered the riding tent Stearns roweled his little black horse viciously. The mare, taken by surprise, bucked so suddenly that the

tall rider was nearly unseated. Stearns was a good rider—better than most of the staff Drumm carried with the show—but the unlooked-for pitch of the horse, plus the overload of liquor that he carried, made him look suspiciously like a tyro.

"Haw, haw, haw!" came loudly from a stout, loud-voiced man on the front row.

The ungovernable temper that had kept Jim Stearns almost an outcast for five years flamed up in instant response to the contemptuous laugh, which had started a series of snickers. His wrath plus his drinking made him totally unmindful of anything but getting at the one who had given vent to that amused, scornful laugh. Like a flash he was off his horse and had started for the loud-voiced spectator.

When Drumm and three of the riders arrived on the scene Stearns was being held by four men, still fighting wildly. His face was convulsed with the wild lust to get at his man.

"Get out of here, you fool!" snarled Drumm, and with the aid of his riders he yanked and pushed the still fighting Stearns back into the horse tent.

"Get out there and ride!" roared the in-

censed owner to Pete Driggs, who was next in order. "As for you, come to the office and get your time!"

Stearns followed the bulky boss out of the tent and into a small one which served as office and living-quarters for Drumm.

Bogie Bill turned on the sullen Stearns with glittering eyes.

"You'll spoil my show, will you, you blankety blank, booze-guzzling, chicken-livered—"

He never got any further. Stearns pulled the Colt which all the riders wore for "atmosphere" when showing and which was loaded for the shooting exhibition.

The crack of the shot seemed to reverberate with hideous sound in the tent as Drumm fell, wondering disbelief in his eyes.

Drumm was dead before he struck the ground. All insane passion left Stearns as his erstwhile employer struck the wooden flooring of the tent. Ever since he could remember the sullen rider's life had been a series of escapades, ranging from negligible scrapes to almost life and death imbroglios, but this was the climax of them all. The die was cast.

He was perfectly cool and alert, suddenly,

as he crowded the body beneath the low cot and draped the blanket down to hide it. He quickly replaced the spent shot in the magazine clip, listening closely the while. Apparently the shot had gone unnoticed in all the turmoil of cheering spectators in the show proper plus the manifold noises of the carnival. Drumm's tent was on the opposite side of the show tent from that used by the carnival, and unless someone in the horse tent had heard it his chances of a few hours' respite were good. Drumm was often hard to find while the show was going on, and his absence would arouse no suspicion.

Encouraged by the fact that no one had appeared, Stearns took time to hide the body beneath a pile of saddles and blankets that were lying in one corner of the tent. First he pulled out a well-filled pocketbook from the dead man's pocket. Then he stole out, skirting the carnival at a safe distance, and headed for the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks, which ran past Donovan Field less than a mile away.

From moment to moment he stopped to listen, but there were no signs of pursuit. With luck it might be that he could reach the border. The more he thought of it the more encouraged

he was to hope that it would be morning before the body was found. He had hidden it well beneath the high-piled saddles and blankets.

Blackie Stearns possessed no idea of right and wrong—his creed had always been to get away with as much as was safely possible. He was as cool and nerveless as if nothing had happened as he lay beneath the shelter of some bushes along the railroad track. The black, ungovernable rage that possessed him at times had at last been his undoing—and in some ways he was glad.

For years he had drifted from job to job, from fight to fight, because sooner or later he alienated everyone around him, wherever he was. He was hard, bitter, unrepentant. If he should be able to get across the Rio Grande he would not greatly regret the shooting of Bogie Bill.

Stearns knew the border, and he knew what he would do when he got there. So he lay quietly and strained his eyes toward San Antonio, looking for a head-light to loom up northward.

Fortune favored him. A freight, slowing for the Donovan Field crossing, passed his hiding-

place slowly enough for him to risk boarding it. Running with the train, he managed to catch a ladder and swing aboard. The freight picked up speed and set out on the trip to Laredo.

CHAPTER X

OUTSIDE THE LAW

Two men were sitting on the small veranda of a big, two-story structure a hundred yards south of the Rio Grande. The same two men had sat there, at intervals, many times before, and should one who had been present at their last interview, nearly two months before, come upon them this particular night it would have seemed as if they had not moved. The squat, powerfully built one sat in a big crude arm-chair. The smaller man was squatting on his heels against the wall.

The veranda was at the rear of the big building, which was the general store of Dave Fitzpatrick. Tia Nita, Mexico, the collection of unpainted board building that surrounded the store, was owned, lock, stock, and barrel, by the massive, gray-haired man in the chair.

It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was sinking in crimson glory. In a few minutes the semi-tropic twilight would descend with what

would be startling swiftness farther north.

"You arrived at the right time, Searles," Fitzpatrick was saying, his light eyes gazing steadily at the fringe of scrubby growth that outlined the banks of the river.

His mouth, which seemed like a wide, almost lipless slit in his square face, scarcely moved as he spoke. His face was without tan or wrinkle, the skin stretched so tightly across the bony framework that it seemed as if a hollow or a wrinkle in it would be impossible.

Searles showed the effects of many years along the border. His lined face was brown and leathery, the eyes in a perpetual squint. His sandy hair was thin and almost colorless. He was clasping his knees with big gnarled hands that were like old mahogany in their coloring. He did not answer Fitzpatrick, but as was his custom remained silent until words were absolutely necessary.

Fitzpatrick apparently did not expect any answer. He seemed to be thinking deeply as he gazed with unwinking steadiness straight ahead of him. Finally he went on.

"I heard from Beers, up at Ausman, today.

Young Lee is there—flew in and will be there a few days. Got in yesterday."

His voice was level and expressionless. Not a hint of shading varied his words. There was a curious impression of cold, passionless power about the man, whose whole body seemed to be as motionless as though made of stone. Not even a finger moved.

Searles, who was small, middle-aged, utterly neutral-looking, still maintained his silence. He took out the makings, rolled himself a cigaret and lit it.

"The last time you were here I gave you my reasons for crushing young Lee—for doing to his father what he did for me twenty years ago. I broke my rule, in telling you, for the first time in my life. 'Weasel' Williams failed. Although Lee seems to be hooked right now, his being in Ausman is too good an opportunity to clinch matters. Remember what I told you—that when I finally see him ruined, I leave the border country. I have waited a long time for my opportunity. You yourself will go to Ausman to handle the thing. You know what I have never told any other living man, and

therefore you will know better than to fall down."

Without varying his voice in any way, without even the suspicion of loudness or emphasis, Fitzpatrick's words conveyed a depth of cold, bitter, venomous resolution that no one—least of all Searles—could mistake.

Searles expelled a cloud of smoke from his lungs before he replied. His words seemed to be irrelevant.

"What are you going to do about Weasel—leave him in jail?" he asked.

Searles had been serving Fitzpatrick well for ten years, and of all countless men who obeyed their chief, from ignorant Mexicans to men of supposed wealth and standing, he was closest to him. The greatest of the Mexican bandits with whom Fitzpatrick carried on his traffic in many things—information as well as merchandise—would have thought many times before asking him a question as to his plans about anything save the matter immediately in hand.

Fitzpatrick replied briefly, after a long pause.

"Weasel failed to get away with stealing the carburetor Lee and Cary invented, didn't he?

He's off the list. His case might be a warning to you, Searles."

The imperturbable Searles took another drag at his cigaret, his calm untroubled.

"Then you don't think that the planted opium and all the stir that's being made over it is enough to fix on this here Lee?" he asked, rocking gently on his heels.

"Probably it is. I understand that Bill Lee was down to San Antonio and that he is stirring up a lot of action along the border. He was at the bottom of that pick-up near Del Rio the other night, I imagine. He's a big man in Texas, but he doesn't know that Manuel Veriga is in Mexico City."

"So Manny planted the stuff in the ship, did he?"

"Yes, and saved his hide by getting away with it, too. Snow, in San Antone, was primed to pick it up."

The conversation was so utterly quiet and unemotional that it would have worn on the nerves of almost anyone but the two men themselves. The torpid Fitzpatrick seemed to have a quality of resistless power about him, although it would be puzzling to try to analyze

any particular source of the impression. His smooth, square face, which seemed in the half-light to have a gray tinge that harmonized with the grizzled hair and gray flannel shirt, was more like a mask than a human countenance—the long, narrow eyes mirrored none of the thoughts or emotions within. Searles was as he had been for many years—not even Fitzpatrick had ever succeeded in making him give any indications of either fear or enthusiasm.

It was significant of Fitzpatrick that Searles should ask him that question as to the identity of the man who had succeeded in planting the contraband stuff in Lee's ship. Searles knew more about the extent of his chief's operations than any other four men, and yet he was constantly learning more and more of how really far-reaching the strings were that centered in Tia Nita.

"With Manuel in Mexico City I reckon Lee is hooked. Near as I can figure it's going to take a confession to get the youngster out o' that, ain't it?"

"Yes. I'm keeping the pot boiling in San Antonio. If necessary, Sallman can start digging away at the War Department in Washing-

ton. But it will be quicker action to rope and hog-tie Lee for good in Ausman."

Searles remembered with the ghost of a smile how he had been shaken to his spurs, as he expressed it, when he had first heard Fitzpatrick carelessly mention the name of Sallman, who was somewhat of a power in the national administration. More than any other single thing in all his years as an underling of the man sitting beside him, that name had shown him what kind of an organization Fitzpatrick had under him.

He had known of Chinamen, bandit chiefs, gunmen, judges, bankers and at least one mayor of a sizable town who were eating out of the hand of the man who was ostensibly the keeper of a general store; he knew of one revolution in Mexico largely promoted by that same merchant; but somehow the knowledge that one of his underlings was serving in a position of trust and power in the nation's capital was more impressive than all of Fitzpatrick's other human and official machinery combined.

He did not ask for any details regarding the projected trip to Ausman, but smoked tran-

quilly and waited. The velvet dusk was commencing to soften the outlines of the mesquite and veil the ugliness of the rough buildings, and the vanguard of the stars shone palely, widely scattered across the darkening sky.

Fitzpatrick was silent, likewise. Only the low hiss of the Rio Grande and the noises of stirring night things marred the stillness, when a low knock came to their ears from within the store. Fitzpatrick's living-quarters opened off the veranda on which they were sitting.

"What is it?"

The level voice was no louder than when he had been talking to Searles, but the answer came promptly, in liquid Spanish:

"A man who wishes to see you, *señor.*"

"Who is it?"

"He will not say, *señor.* José and I stopped him. He was riding from Nuevo Laredo to see the *señor,* he said. He is young and tall."

"Light the lamp and bring him around here."

"*Si, Señor.*"

In a moment the soft light of a big, white-shaded lamp glowed through the open door. Searles seemed to sink into deeper shadow

against the wall. Fitzpatrick, as if carved from stone, was likewise in shadow. Not even a hand had moved since the start of his conversation with Searles.

In a moment a young Mexican appeared around the corner of the building, guiding Blackie Stearns. The Mexican stopped a few feet from the veranda and indicated it to Stearns with a gesture of his hand. Then he took up his station by the corner, out of earshot. Two guns sagged from his belt.

Stearns walked slowly up to the porch, striving to pierce the gloom that half veiled the two men.

"Dave Fitzpatrick?" he inquired, a touch of bravado in his words.

As he stood in the light streaming from the doorway the marks of his journey showed plainly on his rather gaudy costume—red bandanna, blue flannel shirt and much filigreed boots. He was dressed as he had been for the show. His face was haggard and dirty, but the broad shoulders were held well back and his tall figure was straight.

There was an appreciable interval before Fitzpatrick spoke.

"Well?" he said finally.

"I'm here after a job," stated Stearns, his hard, bold eyes on Fitzpatrick.

The rider got a curious impression that the light eyes of the man before him would shine like a cat's at night—they seemed more obvious than any other detail of Fitzpatrick's appearance in the deepening twilight.

"Well?" said Fitzpatrick again.

The icy inscrutability of the man to whom he was talking began to affect Stearns with much the same sort of half-hypnotism that a snake exercises. Stearns knew his border, through hard experience, and the knowledge of who Fitzpatrick was plus the influence of his physical nearness sent the rider into a species of half-fearful nervousness. His next words were like the slightly hysterical bravado of a man who is defying he knows not what.

"If you can't use me, I'll blow, but I'd like to know!"

Fitzpatrick refused to be hurried. There was another interval, during which the murderer of Bogie Bill stirred restlessly despite himself.

"How long has it been since you had any-

thing to eat?" asked Fitzpatrick suddenly, his words as flat and emotionless as ever.

"This morning," returned Stearns, glancing surprisedly from Searles to his chief and back again.

"Tell José to fix you up and bring you back in half an hour."

Stearns started to speak, and then checked himself with an effort. He turned without a word and strode off toward the Mexican, who was still lounging against the corner of the store, his cigaret glowing dully.

"Searles, did you notice that man?"

"How?"

"Remind you of anybody?"

"Not especially."

"Do you think that in the dark, with a uniform and a mask, he might make it hard for anybody who hadn't seen him close to swear that it was *not* Lee? Say in Ausman?"

Searles considered the matter leisurely. The two men were built alike—tall, rangy, broad-shouldered. Their faces, while there was no resemblance, were of the same cast, although Stearns' was sullen and scowling. The little Texan finally nodded.

"I reckon maybe—in Ausman," he stated.

For the next half-hour Fitzpatrick did what he would do, perhaps, with no other man than Searles and for no other enterprise than the one which meant the satisfying of a twenty-year lust for vengeance—talked over his plans with another man. As quietly and casually as if little depended on it, although with a subtle undercurrent that was deadly in its resolution, Fitzpatrick talked and Searles mostly listened, his lined face showing no slightest indication that he realized what the project might mean to him.

When Stearns returned and José had taken up his former position at the corner Fitzpatrick said—

"Stearns, I can—"

The tall rider jumped as if he had been shot.

"—use you for a while. If you succeed it will be worth your while—and it won't be as dangerous as shooting Bogie Bill Drumm. If you fail—"

The cold voice ceased, but Stearns scarcely noticed. His mind was in a whirl at the realization that already Fitzpatrick knew who he was. He was hooked more tightly at the start

than he had expected. Suddenly the massive, sphinx-like bulk looming vaguely from the huge armchair took on an individual sinister power to the nerve-shaken criminal. He felt helpless and could not explain exactly why.

"You will go to Ausman, Texas, with Searles, here, and be under his orders. You have nothing to fear from the shooting in San Antonio—providing you do what you are told. You will be instructed there as to what you're expected to do."

For just a moment Fitzpatrick's eyes darted rapidly to the squatting figure of Searles, and then back to the sullen young rider before him.

"A day or two after you arrive in Ausman—by boat—I will be there to instruct you myself," he said.

For once, at least, Searles was completely and obviously astonished.

CHAPTER XI

REX SEEKS AN ANSWER

Sergeant Correll and the two flyers got to work bright and early the day following the arrival of the loaded ship in Ausman. The reconstruction of a wrecked ship in the field is always a long and tedious job, particularly so in this case, because the ship had been upside down in the mud for many hours.

Correll had put all his time on the motor as soon as he had succeeded in getting the ship right side up again. The more obvious damage to the eight-cylinder engine had been rectified, but there remained the job of checking up the delicate timing by which magnetoes, camshafts, crankshaft and other things work in delicate synchronization. There was rust and dirt to wipe from contact points and distributor plugs, and sixteen spark plugs to remove and inspect. All day the three airmen, occasionally compelled to wait for a tool from their scanty kit, fussed over the all-important motor.

It was a rather silent day, on the whole, until late afternoon. Rex was thinking of his predicament, and still more of the possible opportunity of locking horns with his Nemesis again in Ausman. The evening before the three Army men had set out to see the town, and it bore out the comments of both Correll and the good Samaritan in Barnes City. There was little really tangible evidence. Rex reflected, and yet there was an indefinable atmosphere that set the little village apart in his experience.

True, there were many people who showed the effects of liquor—more than usual in a town so far from the border, but nothing unusual for a man accustomed to towns lying close to the Rio Grande. Balavo, the Mexican of the automobile wreck, owned a place which was rather curious, from the impression one gained from the wide-open doors and borne out by Sergeant Correll, who had visited it.

Apparently it was a real old-fashioned saloon, dance hall and gambling place. Rex had yearned to go inside and look beyond the swinging doors in the back of the saloon itself; three weeks before he would have, but now courting useless complications for the mere joy

of the struggle—any chance he might take would be a carefully calculated one in Ausman.

It was apparent to a casual observer that the law, represented almost solely by one Vancouver B. Dale, extended potent protection to open law breaking so far as the serving of the cup that cheers went. But there were other things which seemed to hint aggravatingly at more extensive and subtle differences in the town. There was the complete lack of negroes and the overwhelming percentage of Mexicans, for instance.

Then the fact that for all practical purposes Mr. James Weston had the only store of any consequence in the town, aside from a restaurant, a candy and ice cream place, and a few other minor businesses. And there was Sergeant Correll's word that not one in ten of the white men appeared to have a thing in the world to do.

Correll was not habitually talkative, especially in the presence of his superiors. Rex was engrossed in his own thoughts and Carruthers, if the truth were to be told, was devoting considerable mental attentions to Corinne Weston.

Unconsciously the few conversations he started reflected his thoughts, and the ever-observant Rex grinned to himself.

Late in the afternoon, just as they were preparing to knock off work for the day, Rex gave utterance for the first time to his thoughts regarding the possible complications that might arise from his presence in Ausman.

"I've been trying to figure this town all day and I'll be hanged if I'm not stumped!" he observed, wrenching a spark plug home with a last turn at the plug wrench.

He was perched on top of the motor, his long legs dangling.

Correll, who was tracking the propeller by means of a box and a huge wrench, stopped work for a moment and wiped the perspiration from his red, fleshy face.

"Lieutenant, some time or other I'm going to spring my theory on you, when I get the nerve. It don't sound reasonable—"

"Oh, I've got more than half an idea that Fitzpatrick's got his claws in here, but it sounds so foolish," returned Rex, laying aside his wrench for a moment. "What in the world

Beers would be doing here I don't know, but on the other hand what would Fitzpatrick be doing nosing around this town?"

Correll sat on the box by means of which he had been measuring the track of the propeller as it swung, and lit a big black pipe.

"There's something funny about the law in this town, ain't there?" he inquired oratorically.

"Right," admitted Carruthers, coming out of his trance.

"And there's too many Mexicans and too few darkies, ain't there?"

"Well, it's unusual anyway," said Rex, watching the burly sergeant with a whimsical expression.

He knew that old Correll was getting at something, but it was amusing to see him trying to persuade himself with laborious logic that he was not talking Wild West fiction.

"Did you ever take a look at Fitzpatrick's hangout, Tia Nita, or hear about it?" was the old cavalry sergeant's next query.

"No, except that it was just a little Mexican town like a dozen other hamlets along the border."

"Well, the truth of the matter is that Fitzpatrick owns hundreds—yes, by cripes, thousands—of acres of land—just about the whole country around Tia Nita. He lets it out to the Mexicans on shares or something, makes 'em do all their trading at that store of his, and has 'em in the hollow of his hand. They don't dare blow their noses without askin' him. He's like a king with 'em. Get the idea?"

"That all these Mex people around here are on the same basis?"

"They do all the cultivatin' of the land, don't they?"

Carruthers, who had long since finished cleaning out the oil tank with gasoline and was now smoking restfully as he sat on one wheel, slapped his thigh enthusiastically.

"By Jupiter, Rex, I believe Correll is right!"

Rex looked at Correll with quizzical admiration. Vague ideas of a similar nature had been running through his own head ever since the warning of Mr. Weston had been backed by the sight of Beers—or the man he thought was Beers. He was glad that someone else had the same idea, and he enjoyed listening to the almost painfully serious sergeant work his

theories out. He had not suspected that old Correll was as keen as his words were showing him to be.

"What would you say about—Mr. Weston? He seems to be the big gun here," inquired Rex, rolling a cigaret deftly.

"That's kind of got me stopped, unless—"

He stopped in embarrassment. He didn't know just what degree of friendship existed between the flyers and the Westons. Rex grinned down at Carruthers from his lofty perch.

"As long as our remarks are confined to Mr. Weston, why, let's speak freely," he said.

"It may seem queer to you, lieutenant, but I've known of one man—and heard of a lot more—that was roped and hog-tied by Fitzpatrick—that would stack up bigger than Weston, by a long row of beans," declared Correll.

"Well, time will tell," said Rex, vaulting to the ground. "Let's pick up and get gone from here."

"I think we ought to drop in and see how Miss Weston is coming," said Carruthers as the three men started collecting the tools and putting them in their proper niches in the kit.

"I don't know—might cause a relapse if she had too much excitement," replied Rex with a wink at the sergeant.

Carruthers laughed good-naturedly.

"It's the proper thing to do and you know it," he stated. "Besides, you may pick up some dope from her father if he's around. Your guard is going and refuses to let his prisoner out of his sight."

"I have no choice, then. Is our private jitney going to be here this aftenoon, Correll?"

"Yes, sir. Four o'clock. You couldn't pry that kid loose from us with a crowbar. He thinks a flyer is the next thing to the twelve apostles."

They finished wrapping the tools, and then covered up with canvas covers motor, propeller and rear cockpit, which was exposed to the weather. This finished, they reclined in the shade of a wing to await the coming of their car.

"Returning to the main topic, what do you two Sherlocks figure Fitzpatrick would have his hand in here for?" asked Carruthers.

"Well, I don't know. I've got a good theory, but according to the best detective fiction it is

very easy to twist fact to fit theories. But concentrate your massive intellect on a few queries. Now—"

"I doubt whether I can comprehend your questions through the word barrage you're putting out, but go ahead."

"From what you've heard of Fitzpatrick, what is his main source of income?"

"Why, smuggling dope and liquor from Mexico, and guns and things back over, I guess."

"That's a good guess," put in Correll.

"Very. Ausman is right on the Gulf, isn't it? And some of those launches and things could be used to transport contraband goods from a small steamer to land, couldn't they?"

Correll slapped his thigh enthusiastically as he burst forth:

"What I've been thinkin' to a T, lieutenant! And all these cars around here, which I can't see the reason for, could be used mighty well carrying drugs up to San Antone, Corpus Christi, Houston, and so forth, couldn't they? And there's three or four trucks in town, too. It would be a mint!"

Beneath the surface facetiousness of Lee's

manner there had been a subtle undercurrent that was profoundly serious. The full possibilities of a small, isolated town such as Ausman, controlled entirely for all practical purposes by Fitzpatrick, located on the Gulf, had been growing in his mind ever since the definite suspicion that his enemy had a foothold. Evidence from Correll and Carruthers that his carefully built-up theories were not too fantastic gave his suspicions additional strength.

"Just look what it would mean," he told them, as his eyes rested on a cloud of dust that was rising from the rough country road half a mile away. "If Fitzpatrick had a small boat of some kind that could make the trip from some small Mexican port, he could unload at night in Ausman, and then it would be dead easy for his henchmen here to get the stuff—small but very valuable commodities like drugs—to any of the near-by cities in all kinds of ways. If half the mail and express of this town contained some, and the autos carried considerable, and even people making personal trips on the train should carry gripfuls of it to deliver to designated agents—"

"They never would stand a chance of being searched, either," Correll declared. "Lieutenant, unless our original idea is dead wrong—about Fitzpatrick actually being the toad in this peculiar puddle—I'll stake a nickel or two we ain't far off."

"I believe Correll is right," Carruthers stated. "Say all these people, or most of 'em, were under Fitzpatrick's thumb, and a lot of the white men, including the big bugs like Dale, the town marshal, and Mr. Weston, and this Balavo—why, thousands of dollars' worth of stuff a week could pass through here and nobody know!"

"Well, here's our chariot," said Rex, uncoiling his long length lazily. "Let's hie to the house of the fair invalid and her St. Vitus daddy—bless him for dropping that hint!"

"I'll bet it cost him somethin', too," said Correll as they walked toward the car. "I believe we—or rather you—have got the jump on his nibs, lieutenant."

"Once before I was lucky enough to have advance information about him, and it netted me two thousand bucks," Lee remarked. "If I've got it again, and in some way or other

could rook him once more, I'd cheerfully donate that two thousand and a lot more."

"Here's hoping," said Carruthers. Correll didn't say anything but he thought to himself. "I may be in my second childhood, but I smell something coming. If it comes, my bets are that the lieutenant won't come in last!"

A few minutes later the two flyers were greeting Corinne, who was reclining on a lounge which had been moved to the porch.

They were talking gaily as her father's car drove up to the gate.

Mr. Weston strode up the path hurriedly, his gaunt face looking even worse than it had the day before.

"Afternoon, afternoon, boys. And how's the little girl this afternoon?"

"Doing nicely, thank you," she replied as he bent and kissed her lightly. "The arm's not so bad and I've had a lot of callers—'Daddy George' was here quite a while this afternoon."

"So he said, so he said," her father said, fanning himself rapidly with his hat. "Old fellow that's been with me for years and years—employ him as a night watchman at the store

just to give him something to do. Lives in a little shack over at the other end o' town. Quite an old character."

Though the description was for the benefit of the flyers, their host did not look at them directly a single time. His eyes darted rapidly from object to object, never focusing for more than an instant.

Corinne's eyes were shadowed with worry as she looked at her father, and some of the brightness left her face.

"Father's too modest to tell it himself, but several years ago he sent Daddy and his wife, Aunt Judy, out to California to try and save Aunt Judy's life. She did live several months longer on account of it. Since then Daddy has been like a shadow—always with us. We were living in El Paso then."

"Mind if I smoke?" inquired Rex casually.

"Of course not! I wouldn't know father without a cigar!" laughed the girl.

As he rolled the cigaret Rex glanced up at Carruthers to see whether Corinne's remark about living in El Paso had made any impression on him, but Carruthers had neither eyes nor thoughts for anything but Corinne.

"A rattlesnake might be clicking his tail within two feet of Jack and he'd never know it right this minute," Rex remarked to himself, lighting the slim cigaret which was a counterpart of his father's favorite smoke.

"Mr. Lee, have you ever seen my chickens? Got some pure-bred White Leghorns—greatest layers in the world—greatest layers in the world," said Mr. Weston abruptly, removing his half-chewed cigar and clawing at his thin Vandyke nervously.

"No, and I'd sure like to see them," returned Rex.

"Excuse us a minute—won't take but a minute," said Mr. Weston, and he and Rex disappeared around the corner of the house.

Carruthers and the girl were silent for a moment. Finally Corinne took her eyes from the battered automobile which was still waiting a few yards down the driveway and looked at Carruthers, her hazel eyes dark and troubled.

"I'm so worried about dad," she said with a little catch in her voice.

"He—he doesn't seem to be very well," said Carruthers awkwardly.

"I can't imagine what is the matter with

him, but ever since we came here he has been different. I went to San Marcos to school a couple of years, and when I got back two years ago I noticed the change in him. Sometimes he's so queer—and somehow it seems to me that today he is worse than he has ever been."

She gazed moodily into the distance, her face reflecting her worried thoughts. Carruthers was at a loss—he himself felt as if he had known her for months instead of days, but he was afraid of presuming to try to comfort her.

"I can't understand why we ever came here," she said at length. "He was in a bank at El Paso, and then after Mother died we came to Ausman and he bought the store. It was a very small place then. We didn't know a soul here, except Daddy George, and he came with us."

Like a flash the thought came to Carruthers that had come to Rex at the first mention of El Paso. It was almost a certainty that Mr. Weston had come to Ausman at the behest of Dave Fitzpatrick. Suddenly unutterable pity welled up in the young pilot's heart for the girl, so helpless to combat the forces which must be slowly tearing her father to pieces.

"Miss Weston, you haven't known me—us—long but believe me if there is anything we can do for you—if we can help in any way at all—"

Quick tears welled into her eyes and her voice was unsteady.

"Thanks so much. I'm sure you would," she said. "You can't imagine what a relief it is just to talk to somebody about it. There isn't a soul in this miserable place to whom I feel that I could even hint at anything so personal."

She dabbed at her eyes.

"By the way," said Carruthers, "have you or your father heard from Balavo? I understand he owns the big casino, or whatever you call it, in town."

"Oh, yes. He was in to see father and wanted to pay for the little Ford and everything. He wanted to see me, too, but I can't stand him. He tries to come to the house quite often."

The flyers had told neither Corinne nor Mr. Weston about their fracas with the Mexican or the reason for it, and apparently Corinne had no idea that anything more than the wreck itself had happened.

Rex and Mr. Weston came around the corner of the house, and Carruthers got to his feet. He held out his hand, and his handsome face was very serious as he said rapidly.

"Don't forget what I said, Miss Weston—and if we leave too soon I'm coming back to Ausman."

"Well, we're going to lose our charioteer unless we hike," came Lee's voice. "We're sure glad the invalid is progressing so well. The effects of the upper ozone on the health are very salubrious, apparently."

Corinne smiled and then became serious as she returned Lee's regard.

"I've not said much, but I know just what chances you must have taken for me, Mr. Lee," she said.

Carruthers observed that Rex showed in his eyes that his interview with Mr. Weston had brought forth something that evidently meant excitement ahead, for they were literally blazing. His light-hearted words bore out the suspicion, for he said:

"They say I carried a valuable load into San Antone a while ago, but I guess it was a more valuable one I landed in Ausman!"

It was the first time he had ever publicly alluded to his public branding as a trafficker in illicit goods, and as the two flyers went down the roadway toward the car Corinne's gaze followed Rex steadily.

Her father, too, was watching the two Army men, and his eyes were mirrors of utter misery.

CHAPTER XII

FITZPATRICK PREPARES

THE little office in the rear of the Weston general store was full to overflowing. Mr. Weston, chewing his finger nails as he slowly crumpled a cigar to bits with the other hand, sat at his desk. Blackie Stearns, who had spent a day in close confinement upstairs, was perched on the safe. Vancouver B. Dale, fat and perspiring representative of law and order for the village of Ausman, completely hid the straight-back chair which seemed utterly inadequate to hold him up.

Beers, the hard-faced, cold-eyed ex-cowboy whom Rex had caused much misery months before when the flyer had sent him back to Dave Fitzpatrick minus two thousand dollars of the smuggling monarch's money, occupied the remaining chair. His business suit made him look uncomfortable and out-of-character.

Outside the office, in the dim shadows of the store, a vague figure could be seen resting com-

fortably on a pile of gaudy blankets. It was Daddy George, the patriarchal night watchman.

"Well, I wish old Fitzpatrick would hurry up," remarked Stearns, the deep wrinkle between his heavy eyebrows as obvious as always. "I sure would like to know what's going to be pulled off."

His careless observation seemed almost to shock the others. Dale and Mr. Weston glanced upward instinctively as if they were afraid someone had overheard.

"Well, I'll gamble it's going to be good," stated Dale, whose small eyes were mere pinpoints peering forth from folds of flesh.

"You're right," agreed Beers with his thin-lipped smile.

"Let's not talk about it—let's not talk about it," grated the storekeeper, leaping to his feet as if his endurance was at an end.

He looked out into the store for a moment, and then resumed his seat, a fresh cigar in his mouth.

"Why so worked up, old socks?" inquired Stearns flippantly.

"Shut your fool mouth!" snapped Beers.

Stearns' face went dark with passion, but his

report was checked by the appearance of Daddy George in the doorway. His long white beard fell halfway to his waist. A battered old sombrero of huge dimensions was set well back on his head.

"Got a match, Jamey?" he asked of Mr. Weston, a brown cigaret in his thin hands.

"Plenty, Dad," returned Mr. Weston with a forced smile, and handed the old man a boxful.

Daddy George peered near-sightedly at the other men in the room, but apparently could not recognize them in the dim light of a flickering oil lamp, for he did not speak to Beers or Dale. He shuffled out into the store again, a revolver swinging well back on his hip.

"Some night watchman," grinned Stearns, who apparently had forgotten his wrath.

"He's an old employee and friend of mine—friend of mine," answered Mr. Weston. "Just does him good to think he's doing something."

"Oh, he must be the old boy, Searles is staying with, isn't he?" queried Stearns.

"Yeah, he's the one. Got a little shack out on the edge of town. He thinks Searles is the king of the herd," said Beers.

"Does he know how Searles makes his livin'?" asked Stearns.

Mr. Weston's face twitched at the blunt question, and Beers and Dale flushed.

"None of your business what he knows. No, he don't know anything, and let me tell you, Mister—"

Searles stepped quietly into the office through the back door, his boot heels clumping on the floor.

"Let's mosey," he said, and without a word the four men followed him out of the door and up the outside steps that led to the second story.

Not a word was spoken as they filed in, through the cluttered little room with the rumpled cot where Stearns had slept, and then into a narrow hallway. Stearns opened the first door, and led the way into a larger room, lighted by a big kerosene lamp.

Dave Fitzpatrick was seated in the further corner, partially in the shadow. He neither moved nor spoke as the visitors filed in and took seats—three of them on the bed and Mr. Weston and Searles on the remaining chairs. Except Searles, every man seemed constrained

and ill at ease—Stearns' flippancy had entirely disappeared, and Dale could not have been more stiff and self-effacing if he had been in the presence of royalty.

"From the fact that I am here you can figure just how important this matter is going to be," began Fitzpatrick without preamble. "Listen, and don't make any mistakes."

The level, expressionless voice was as flat and cold as always. There was an indefinable chill about the man—Stearns had the thought that if he should touch Fitzpatrick the very flesh would be cold and clammy. The smuggler was dressed in a gray sack suit and soft shirt, and his arms were resting on the arms of his chair, the hands fat and motionless.

"Tomorrow afternoon a note will be delivered to Lee which will ask him to meet your daughter, Weston, out at the shack behind your house, at nine o'clock. Balavo is getting the note ready. It will be a creditable forgery, and will be so worded that it will keep Lee out until after ten. The note will make it imperative that he make his way there without being seen. This will—"

"Mr. Fitzpatrick, don't bring my daughter

into this!" exclaimed Mr. Weston, his gaunt face and unhealthy bright eyes beseeching. "I—"

"This will serve to keep Lee out of sight of everybody for two hours," went on Fitzpatrick unemotionally.

Not by so much as a glance of the narrow, unwinking eyes had he paid attention to the distraught Mr. Weston's plea. The merchant sank back on the bed, trembling as though from ague, as the stony voice went on:

"You, Weston, will be working late at your office, and there will be a thousand dollars cash in the open safe. You, Stearns, dressed in a pair of breeches and puttees and a long raincoat, wearing a mask, will come in the back door of the office and hold Weston up. He will call the night watchman before you apparently choke him. Probably the watchman will come running, and you apparently will not see him until he's close. Weston, you'll fall on the floor so the dodderin' old fool won't be afraid to shoot. Searles will have put blank cartridges into his gun—he's staying with him, as usual when he's here—and can do it."

Dale, Stearns, Beers and Weston were lis-

tening now as if the massive figure in the chair had hypnotized them. They were as motionless as Fitzpatrick himself, all except Mr. Weston, to whom it was a physical impossibility to keep still. Searles, his bowed legs crossed comfortably, smoked and gazed tranquilly at the ceiling.

"There will be little noise made, and that will be far from the street. Very few people will be out, anyway. Dale, you will be near by and get there immediately after Stearns has overpowered the watchman and left. The night watchman will give you a general description. You'll pick up Lee in the hotel. The thousand dollars will be hid in his mattress. Smith, the hotel keeper, will do that. He will not have an excuse—if he speaks of the note, it will have been destroyed because the girl asked it, and he won't be able to produce it. He wouldn't think of not doing what she asked him to. He will not have any alibi, on account of sneaking away to answer the note, and going a roundabout way deliberately trying to avoid being seen, at the girl's request. After the arrest he will be taken to the county seat, the watchman, Weston and Dale will appear as

witnesses against him, and Lee will be roped and hog-tied."

"But—but why on earth should you do this to him, Mr. Fitzpatrick?" gulped the agonized Weston. "Why—"

"Do you understand exactly what you're to do, Weston?" returned Fitzpatrick evenly.

"But he—he almost saved my daughter's life!" wailed the store-keeper, now totally without control over himself. "Mr. Fitzpatrick, I —I can't do it!"

It was a hysterical burst of defiance. Fitzpatrick, his eyes snakelike and his voice as void of emphasis or expression as ever, let his gaze dwell for a moment on the thin, twitching man before him.

"You think so much of your daughter that you will probably look forward to her visits in jail, then, Weston," he said evenly.

Dale licked his thick lips and stole a glance at Weston. Beers looked steadily at the floor. To both these men Mr. Weston had been a figure imposing and authoritative, a high-ranking lieutenant to the chief. The hint in Fitzpatrick's last words was a surprise to them both. Searles smoked quietly. Stearns had

his bold black eyes glued to Fitzpatrick's face.

"But—but won't you tell me what you have against him?" begged Mr. Weston. "I—God help me, I'll do it, but—"

He caught a glance from Fitzpatrick's eyes and his hoarse, jerky words ceased abruptly. Beers had told him of Fitzpatrick's desire to frame Lee, but did not know what the smuggler had against him. The relentless venom that permeated Fitzpatrick's every word—the depth of cold hatred and resolve that seemed to radiate from the man—paralyzed the resistance of Mr. Weston, who seemed like a bird struggling futilely in a fowler's net.

Stearns lit a cigaret with shaking fingers that he strove to keep steady. To him there was an atmosphere of tension in the room that affected him strangely. The air seemed filled with the sinister spirit of Fitzpatrick. His influence appeared to be telepathic; without the aid of emphasis by word, voice or action the spirit of the man saturated the consciousness of his henchmen.

"Now, as to details," resumed Fitzpatrick evenly and for an hour, point by point and man by man, the group went over the frame-up.

Nothing was so trivial that the chief had not provided for it. The perfection of the scheme was very clear to the slowest intellect there. Lee without an alibi because he had used every effort to avoid being seen; his only explanation of where he had been a note that he could not produce and of which the supposed writer knew nothing; the absolutely sincere, although vague, testimony of the duped old night watchman, backed by the definite perjury of Dale and Weston; the fact that not a soul in Ausman, excepting those who were in the project, knew of Stearns' presence in the town. The nearsighted old watchman would have no idea as to who he was—probably could not even swear that Dale or Beers, whom he knew, had been in Mr. Weston's office when he had appeared for a match.

Finally everybody but Searles left. As the four men filed down the steps they took deep breaths as though they had just freed themselves from the influence of something uncomfortable and depressing. A personal interview with Fitzpatrick was an event even to them—he realized the effectiveness of keeping himself personally unknown. To all but a very few of

his underlings he was an impersonal, much-dreaded force that was ever in the background, little known but always apparent.

His last words were buried into their minds as they separated at the foot of the steps:

"Remember the importance of what you have to do—and who and what you are."

His cold contempt for them made them wince, but the inference, while it meant different things to the different men, was unpleasantly remindful to them all.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAP IS SET

"No, Dad, I ain't aimin' to leave until tomorrow," Searles replied to a question of the old man's.

The two were seated in front of the isolated little shack, built of unpainted boards chinked with clay, that the old man had occupied since he had accompanied his patron, Mr. Weston, to Ausman. It was afternoon of the day set for the final subjection of Rex Lee.

"I'm glad of it, Jim, boy," returned the old man with a little cackling laugh of pleasure.

He sucked an old corncob contentedly as he sat tilted back against the wall of the shack in an old chair. Searles was squatting on his heels, hat tilted to keep the rays of the westering sun from his eyes.

"I sure am glad," reiterated Daddy George at length. "Outside o' Mr. Weston, there ain't a man I'd rather talk to than you, Jim. Sure

does make a feller feel good to have you stay with him once in a while, boy."

The "boy's" wrinkled, weatherbeaten face became even more creased with deep-cut lines as he smiled one of his rare smiles. Somehow the utter devotion of the old man to Mr. Weston, whom he swore was the nearest thing to an angel that ever walked the earth, always appealed to the tranquil Searles as having more than its share of irony.

The old man glanced at Searles, his kind old eyes full of affectionate regard.

"Jim, ain't it been long enough since your scrape in New Mexico so's you could come back and be a regular American agin?" he asked at length. "Shucks, boy, folks has forgotten that in this part of the country years ago, if they ever knew it. I dunno just what ye do for a livin' Jim, but 'pears like you ramble around an awful lot. How about it?"

"Oh, I'm gettin' along fine, Dad," rejoined Searles quietly.

Inwardly he had been turning over in his mind for some weeks a certain idea that was gradually growing stronger. Perhaps the steadily deepening conviction that the slightest

slip he made in carrying out Fitzpatrick's orders would mean his ruin much more surely than a complete break from his chief, had something to do with it.

Should he strike out for himself there was a strong possibility that he would never meet anyone who would remember him. Should he fail Fitzpatrick, that coldly vindictive, utterly pitiless man would cast him aside like a broken piece of machinery and see to it that the old scrape was revived with evidence enough to freshen people's minds.

Take Weasel Williams, for instance, reflected Searles. Except Searles himself, he was the fastest man on the draw in the border country. He had served Fitzpatrick well in many a difficult, nasty project. He didn't succeed in stealing the invention of Lee and Sergeant Cary, at McMullen, and now Fitzpatrick was seeing to it that he would get more years in jail than that particular crime warranted.

"Well, I may settle down in the U. S. some day, Daddy, but not right now," he stated at length. "When I get a little more of a stake—"

"You're the best judge, boy. I ain't trying to butt in none," interrupted the old man quickly. "Don't make no difference to me, except for your own sake."

"I know—I know," Searles assured him.

It was a queer friendship between the outlaw and the gentleman. Daddy George had once been desert rat, miner, cowboy, in the days of his long-vanished youth. Years before he had done a great service to Searles in El Paso, and from that time on, at intervals Searles had made it a point to drift in occasionally, to the old man's great delight. He would often recall with the pathetic pride of an old man the time he had picked up Searles, almost shot to death, in a dim side street of the "line" in El Paso, and nursed him back to health with the aid of Aunt Judy.

"I wonder where Dave'll go when he finishes gettin' this here flyer?" mused Searles. "That shore would suit me to the ground. Hanged if I ain't reached pretty near the end o' my rope. Dave is a wonder, but then I got so I don't enjoy havin' him dig me too much. Lord, but think o' what some o' these fellows like Weston is gettin'."

Daddy George broke in on the tenor of his thoughts by remarking in a most calm and matter-of-fact way:

"Corinne sure looked purty as a picture today. Her arm is mendin' fine. I wish you knew her, Jim. As fine a gal as ever was in Texas. Lord, I remember when she wasn't nothin' but—"

"I ain't much of a hand with the women, Daddy," drawled Searles dryly. "Not for ten years back."

"Don't get remindin' yourself o' that," the old man interjected decisively, his thin face troubled.

"Oh, I ain't sensitive. I understand them two young aviators that's down here are kind o' shinin' up to her."

"I dunno, mebbe they are. I'm glad if it is true. The girl needs some upstandin' bright young fellers for company. There ain't nobody in Ausman she'd look at—there ain't one of 'em fit to black her boots. In fact, I shouldn't say there was anybody that was, come to think, considerin' that Jamey Weston is her daddy besides. You've heard about how them flyers brought her in in their airyplane, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes—I think you told me," said Searles hastily.

Somehow or other he didn't like to think of young Lee. He remembered vividly the picture of the tall pilot, his eyes flashing with the joy of combat, standing at that poker table in El Paso with drawn gun while his partner, Ransom, dragged in the money Lee had won by outwitting Beers and Aldez, the Mexican.

Searles himself had just been inducted into the game to make the fourth player; the other two were responsible, and he had actually enjoyed the scene. He had heard much of Roaring Bill Lee in the old days. His son was certainly not far behind him.

"Thought I'd passed the diaper days, but—if I'm stuck on tonight's job," reflected the outlaw. "It's—foolish, but I'm plum delighted that all I've got to do is done, and don't amount to much, at that."

He had changed the shells in Dad's gun as it hung in the holster beside his bed that morning, while the old man slept. There were six blanks in the long-barrelled six-shooter now, and likewise in its twin, which the old man kept hanging on the wall.

Rex, Carruthers and Correll were on their way home. They were walking tonight. Their young chauffeur was busy elsewhere, for the first time.

The past three days had been uneventful—disappointingly—but full of hard work for the airmen. After getting the motor fixed and running it for a few moments to make sure it was all right, they had spent a solid half-day looking up a four-mule team with which to drag the ship into the field where Rex and Carruthers had landed theirs.

Then came the tedious work of rerigging the completely loosened fuselage and wings. An airplane fuselage is a series of cubes, composed of four wooden longerons running from nose to tail, with cross-braces every few inches on top and bottom and struts running up and down. Crossed drift and anti-drift wires are stretched between each pair of corners of each cube.

To rig the fuselage it was necessary to get the ship in flying-position by means of propping up the tail until a level on the top longeron showed the bubble standing exactly in the middle, and then start at the nose and work

back to the tail, painstakingly rigging each cube until it was absolutely four-square. This was done by tightening and loosening wires.

Should one of the sections be the least bit out of line, all the following ones would pyramid the error. In that case the warped fuselage would result in loss of airspeed, and would help throw the wings out of line. Many times the disgusted flyers found that after carefully getting one panel lined, the lining of the next one would pull the preceding one out again. It had been tedious, painfully accurate work with an insufficient tool kit, and now at the end of three days it was done, although the wings still were unrigged. This, however, was not so difficult a job.

Every day the two flyers had called on Corinne after work was over, and for the last two evenings Carruthers had made individual descents on the Weston domicile. Corinne almost forgot her unhappiness under the influence of Lee's humor and Carruthers' open devotion. She felt as if she had allies now—and for two years she had been alone, as far as the companionship of youth was concerned.

Little by little the two flyers, especially Car-

ruthers, heard from her lips the story of the disintegration of James Weston. They did not hint at what they conceived to be the real reason for his unexpected move from El Paso to Ausman, and his change from a happy contented man to one moody, nervous and irritable.

Carruthers was made happy by the presence of Corinne, but for Rex himself the days had been disappointing. Not a ripple disturbed the placid current of existence in Ausman. Mr. Weston had habitually avoided the flyers since the day when, with the excuse of showing Lee his chickens, he had begged him again to leave Ausman.

There was but one incident that might be twisted to fit the theory that Dave Fitzpatrick was the power behind the throne in Ausman. The incident had happened the day before.

It was immediately after supper, and Rex was walking past Balavo's place by himself. The stout, bejeweled Mexican came to the door as Rex passed. The flyer looked at him, a half-smile on his face. He expected that Balavo would show signs of rancor, judging from his actions at their first meeting.

However, Balavo hurried out to meet Lee,

shook hands effusively and invited him to come in. Rex refused; his natural course of action would have been to accept, even if he had known that he was putting himself in some danger, but in Ausman he was a man of one idea. Balavo had almost cringed in his efforts to square himself for what he had done out at the wreck, and went out of his way to hint that there were no hard feelings on his part about the beating he had received, and that there would be no attempt at retaliation.

In Lee's mind there was the thought that perhaps Balavo had heard his master's voice—that orders had gone out to avoid any friction with the stranger until the big event took place. It did not seem natural, somehow, for Balavo to change so completely from the vicious wrath and murderous desire for revenge he had shown four days before. Rex knew Mexicans, and their outstanding trait was not a tendency to forgive an injury. In addition, Balavo appeared to have both means and power, and was in a most excellent position to make things hot for Rex in Ausman.

All these things were running through Lee's mind as the three airmen walked slowly down

the main street and turned toward the hotel. The walk had been a silent one. All three were tired and hot.

"I hardly feel like a trip up to Weston's," remarked Rex as the three seated themselves on the edge of the veranda for a moment before going in.

"You might as well. You know it means a lot to Corinne to have somebody come in and sort of break the monotony," replied Carruthers, fanning himself with an old newspaper that had been thrown on the veranda floor.

Mrs. Smith, manager, owner, cook and chambermaid of the hotel, came out the door with two letters in her hand.

"Some mail for you, Mr. Lee," she announced.

Rex looked curiously to see who was writing him at Ausman.

One was from his father forwarded from Donovan Field. He ripped open the flap and glanced through it quickly.

"Dad's busy, all right," he told the others after he had finished. "He says the rangers, the cavalry and all the Customs men and police along the border are getting busy. Old Bill

Trowbridge, sheriff of Hidalgo County, is right in the van. He helped me out on getting Weasel Williams when he stole the carburetor of Cary's and mine, you know. They've pulled a lot of thugs already all along the border, but so far nobody'll talk. Trowbridge has been trying to get wind of who might have planted that opium in our ship. There was a strange spig, pretty well dressed, that was around McMullen and was seen with a soldier just before it happened, but they can't find hair nor hide of him. They're trying to spot the soldier now."

Rex was turning the other letter over in his hand. It was unstamped, evidently had been left at the hotel without going through the post office. It was addressed in a woman's handwriting.

"Oh, ho-o-o!" gibed Carruthers as he caught sight of the writing on the plain white linen envelope. "So in spite of all your good advice to me you've been making hay while the sun shone with some rural belle, have you? Breaking her heart with your smart city—"

"Not so far as I know," responded Rex. "I haven't the least idea who this is from." He opened it as he spoke.

"It's your fatal beauty and your winning ways, Rex."

Rex did not respond. His eyes were glued to the note before him. He read it with swiftly mounting surprise.

My dear Lieutenant Lee:

I have thought and thought before sending you this, but you are the only one I have to turn to in this particular matter. That is, I feel that you are.

There is something that I simply must tell you. I am almost crazy with worry and fear of what seems bound to happen unless by some means or other it can be averted. I know how strange and silly it must seem to you for me to write all this, but I must ask someone for help.

Will you please—*please,* Mr. Lee—meet me for just a few moments at that little shack on top of the hill directly behind our house? I can walk that far now. I will tell the housekeeper that I feel very badly and go to bed and lock the door. I can slip out easily. Try to keep Mr. Carruthers from coming tonight, someway. If

he should Mrs. Bird will tell him I am ill.

Please destroy this note immediately, and don't let anyone see you tonight as you come. It would be horribly embarrassing to me—perhaps worse than that, if a living soul should know. It will be dark by the time you start, and by walking up the Gulf shore and then over no one will see you. If I am a little late, please wait, because I must see you. I am throwing myself on your good graces—don't misjudge me, and believe me when I say that almost nothing would tempt me to do this except what has happened. Hastily,

CORINNE WESTON

P.S. If you get this before you come this afternoon, do not even hint anything about it. I would rather you wouldn't call this afternoon—let Mr. Carruthers come alone. Please do this. I will explain it all tonight.

C. W.

The note was closely written, in a fine, precise handwriting. The paper was plain white linen of good quality. Rex read it for the second time.

Somehow or other, that instinctive sense of danger that is so much a part of outdoor folk sounded a warning call. Had he not been keyed up to a state of watchfulness probably it would have never occurred to him even to think of suspecting the genuineness of the note. Had he been the sort of man to whom girls make a special appeal, and had the thought of doing so lovely a one as Corinne Weston a favor smacked of romance, he would have undoubtedly been so pleasantly excited over the possibilities ahead that nothing else would matter.

As it was, the keen mind and hard common sense that were his heritage from his hardy pioneer father began to get in their work. He was living in the expectation of an opportunity to come to grips with the enemy he felt was entrenched in Ausman, and every person and incident within his ken were examined suspiciously. Looking at the note from that angle, somehow or other it did not ring true.

As he sat silently on the edge of the veranda, the two other men watching him curiously, his mind was working with lightning speed, searching out a possible basis for suspecting the note. For instance, it would be natural for Corinne

to call on Carruthers if she really needed aid of some kind.

Why should she pick Lee in preference to Jack? Why should a mysterious note be used, when she would have every opportunity that afternoon to speak to him personally, at least for long enough to indicate what she wanted? Why should so much secretiveness be emphasized, when it would not be any suspicious circumstance to have him make an open call, as he and Carruthers had been doing for several days?

"Jack, come over here a minute. I've got something I want to talk to you about. Excuse us, Correll."

Carruthers followed him over to the edge of the bank that fell away to the Gulf, fifty feet below. Rex had decided to obey the prompting of the inner sense that warned him. In the old days the Lee luck had been talked of throughout Texas, when Roaring Bill was making winnings at poker that opened the eyes of men even in those days of high play, or cleaving his way through obstacles that seemed insurmountable when rustlers and bad men assisted Nature in making life a continual struggle.

But back of that luck was the audacious spirit and fighting sense of the clan. Lee luck was responsible perhaps for the providential warning that had come to Rex before his passage at arms with Fitzpatrick in El Paso, but it was the timbre of the man that had accounted for his coming away with two thousand dollars which had been bled from his enemy. Right now he was staking much on his instinct that there was more to that note signed "Corinne Weston" than appeared on the surface.

"Jack, listen to this."

Rex read the note slowly, aloud. When he had finished he raised his eyes to Carruthers' flushed face.

"You may think I'm a cad, Jack, but I have no prejudice against confiding in you—even if I believe the note to be *bona fide.*"

Carruthers looked up in surprise.

"You mean you don't think it's O.K.?" he queried.

"I'm inclined to think not. I may be too suspicious, but listen."

One by one he gave his reasons.

"Now, on the other side, what would a faked note do? It would keep me out of sight of

everybody for two hours. If Fitzpatrick is at work and is trying to frame me, it would very probably suit his convenience perfectly to have me out of the way completely for two hours. It might be to plant something in my room at the hotel—almost any crime could be fastened on me in this town unless I had a bullet-proof alibi. What do you think?''

Carruthers did not answer for a moment. He had forgotten the pain he had felt when Rex had read the note—he was thinking now of the possibility of an approaching climax that Rex had been looking forward to ever since he had seen Beers.

''The more I think about it the more reasonable it looks to me, old man,'' he said finally. ''And another reason that you haven't mentioned; I don't believe Corinne would send a note quite like that.''

''Neither do I—not to me, anyhow. Now here's my scheme. It can't get you in wrong—if the note is really straight it may make me somewhat unpopular in the Weston sector, but that'll be my hard luck. You go up to call on her this afternoon, and mention the fact that you saw me reading a note, and just happened

to see the signature, which you thought was hers. It can be in sort of a kidding vein, you know. If the note was straight she'll be embarrassed and show it—that girl couldn't deceive anybody on a thing like that. It will be easy for you to find out, I think. I hate to ask you, Jack, but I believe things may be due to break, and I'm passing no bets!"

The fine blue eyes were alight with expectation and determination, as Rex mentioned the thing he devoutly hoped would happen. It was not the careless, reckless joy in struggle for its own sake, although that was a part of it. It was largely the fierce satisfaction of a man who sees a chance to fight his way out of a tight corner, pitting his strength against his enemy's with a fighting chance to win.

"Why, I'll be tickled to death to do it, Rex, and I'm started right now!" declared Carruthers.

He suited action to the words, and departed at a half-run for a short clean-up in the hotel. Rex, his mind full of the many possible ramifications of his situation, walked slowly back to where Correll was still sitting contentedly on the edge of the veranda.

"Sergeant, there's just a chance that things are due for a break tonight. I can't tell you right now, but when Jack gets back I can. If my suspicions are correct, it may be a big night for the Air Service, whether it affects the status of the service's only opium smuggler or not."

"I hope you're right, lieutenant," said the grizzled old Army man.

"You know I'm jealous of Rex Lee," smiled Carruthers. He and Corinne were seated on the big, comfortable lounge where Corinne spent most of the day.

"Why?" she said. "I hear he's a wonderful flyer, but it seems to me his present situation is far from an enviable one."

"Oh, I know. I wasn't thinking of that. You know that son-of-a-gun got a note from some girl here in Ausman today. These movie idols—"

"Some girl in Ausman!" laughed Corinne surprisedly. "Why, I can't imagine who it could be. There aren't more than eight or ten girls here."

"I just happened to glance over Lee's way

and saw the signature, besides," stated Carruthers with mock solemnity.

"You didn't! Tell me who it was—please. I won't tell a soul, I swear I won't."

Her eyes were brimming with delighted anticipation as she begged him to tell her. She was dressed in white, today, and the color was commencing to return to her face. She was dangerously charming at that moment, reflected Carruthers, with a sort of half-frightened happiness flooding through him.

"It looked like Corinne Weston to me!" he laughed, hiding the bluntness of his words behind his mirth.

"Oh, that's mean!" she reproached him. "Here you get me all worked up about a budding romance with one of the village belles, and it's all a story. Or is it?"

Carruthers was now thoroughly satisfied. Tense expectancy ran through him like fire. In the happiness of frequent calls on Corinne plus the hard work on the ship and the complete lack of any activity on Fitzpatrick's part during the past three days the young flyer had almost forgotten about possible complications with the

smuggler. Now, however, the apparently sure indication that things were due to break filled his thoughts.

He took a chance and rapidly told Corinne the story. He did not mention her father's warning to Rex, or their suspicions of him. The girl's face was flushed and her great hazel eyes shadowed with indignation as she heard of the note in her name. This did not prevent her from comprehending the bitterness of the struggle between Rex Lee and his enemy.

"But what could Fitzpatrick be doing down here in this little town?" she asked when Carruthers finished.

Fearful that she might grasp some connection between her father and the power that was menacing Lee, Carruthers strove to change the subject, but without success.

"Do you suppose it would be possible that people who were a little jealous might have written that note to Mr. Lee so that they could have a good chance to have a fight with him?" she asked, reddening just a trifle as she met the flyer's eye.

"I don't think so. Besides, anybody that had any eyes could see that I'm the most interested

man around the Weston house," returned Carruthers boldly. "What admirers have you that you would suspect of such a nefarious deed?" he went on with a smile.

"That greasy Balavo is always trying to get friendly, and there is a George Dale," she returned absently. "But I don't think—"

"No, it's Fitzpatrick, I'm sure," said Carruthers decisively.

Suddenly she caught her breath with a little sob.

"Do—do you suppose my father could be—"

She did not finish. The connection between the letter signed with her name and her father's recently exaggerated peculiarities came to her with paralyzing force. Suddenly she knew the truth, and her shoulders shook with sobs. Before he knew it Carruthers was faced with the need of quieting her and he was saying foolish things into her ear to comfort her.

The storm was over in a moment, and as she looked up she even tried to smile.

"You are all wrong," lied Carruthers. "It was a natural thing for them to do; they knew that Rex and I had done you a little favor and were here a great deal."

"I—I hope so," she returned, as she gave him her hand in farewell. "And you don't know how I'm hoping and praying that all your suspicions are wrong and that it's just some silly joke."

"We're not hoping so," stated Carruthers, turning for an instant at the top of the steps. Mr. Weston's car was approaching, a quarter of a mile from them. "Corinne, Rex will be primed tonight not only to keep clear of any entanglement, but to get something on Fitzpatrick himself, if he can. And I hear that when Lee gets into action, it's pretty to watch. By-by until tomorrow."

Carruthers told Rex his story with blazing eyes and excited speech. The two flyers called Correll, and told him all the details, to that worthy's delighted astonishment.

"Now, I believe the lay is this—I've been oiling the old mental wheels as much as they'll stand," said Rex, his words more softly deliberate than usual. "They want me out of the way at nine o'clock. Whether completely out of town or just out of my room and in a place where nobody can see, I don't know. I suggest

that Correll stay in my room with the light out, and his gun, in case there should be any attempt at planting stuff. You and I, Carruthers, will sneak out to the supposed meeting-place at the shack, about eight o'clock, to see whether anything is doing out there. I don't believe there is, because so far foul play has not been Fitzpatrick's game. We'll have the hotel-keeper's son go along, if possible, because your unsupported word might not go far.

"At nine o'clock we'll start downtown. It will be a good thing to have a lot of people see us—on the outskirts of town, I mean. I believe there is going to be some fake crime pulled off."

He stopped speaking for a minute, apparently deep in thought.

"In case my hunch about a planted robbery, or something, is correct, and in the event that our suspicions of Mr. Weston—"

"Now you're talking, lieutenant," Correll interrupted eagerly.

"Maybe I said a mouthful, and maybe not," said Rex with a grin. "But if I hit the bull's-eye I figure it might be a good idea to see what brand that night watchman carries. If

the event takes place at Weston's store, the night watchman would be fixed some way, wouldn't he?"

"He'd have to be," agreed the excited Carruthers.

"Well, let's stray toward his shack, and have a little converse with him. Correll, suppose you look up our kid jitney-driver and fix it for him to go along with us, if you can."

The two flyers came in sight of Daddy George's shack in a few minutes. Two men were sitting in front of it. One of them disappeared while they were still too far away to have any idea what he looked like.

As they came closer and obtained a good view of the patriarchal old man, Rex remarked in low tones:

"He sure doesn't look the part of a thug, does he?"

"More like the kind of man you'd call uncle," agreed Carruthers.

"Is this Daddy George, sir?" asked Rex with a smile.

"Right, son. And you're them two airplaners that brought Corinne Weston in, ain't ye?"

"Yes, sir. We've heard Miss Weston speak

of you so much we thought we'd drop in and talk a while with you," said Jack.

"Glad to have ye, boys. Set down," returned the old man hospitably. "I'll git another chair—"

"Don't do it," interrupted Rex. "I'll just use the ground."

Carruthers took the chair and Rex squatted on his heels near the cabin wall. They talked of several matters, mostly of the Westons, and all the time, Rex was appraising his host. Unless he was utterly misled, Daddy George was incapable of taking in any underhanded, double-crossing frame-up such as the flyers suspected. In that event, either the suspected crime was not to be committed at Weston's store, or else the old man was to be an innocent party.

"Well, boys, I hate to hurry yuh, but I've got to git on the job down to the store," said Daddy George at length. "I'll walk a piece with yuh, if you're goin' back."

"Fine. We're due back for supper right now," said Rex as the three arose from their comfortable positions.

The night watchman went inside and secured his holster with the big, old-fashioned gun in

it, put on his huge, battered Stetson and joined them.

The sight of the gun gave Rex an idea. Somehow it seemed that unless all their carefully built-up deductions were wrong, there was something due to happen that night, and Weston's store was the logical location for it, from every angle. He was certain that Daddy George was not involved—the utter simplicity and sincere kindliness that were visible in his looks and actions were not assumed, or else the old man would have been the most wonderful actor of the age. If Daddy George was to be a catspaw, and that man who had left when they came in sight perhaps one of Fitzpatrick's men—

"We chased a visitor of yours away, I'm afraid when we came in sight," he said casually as they walked down the road.

"Oh, no, no," the old-timer assured him—somewhat nervously—Rex thought, "just a friend of mine—he was goin' anyhow."

As a matter of fact Searles had left precipitately with explicit instructions that under no circumstances was his name to be mentioned to

the flyers. The old man was familiar enough with Searles to know that his visits to Ausman were always inconspicuous, and it did not seem strange to him that Searles had enjoined the strictest secrecy.

Rex walked along silently for a minute, while Carruthers kept the conversation going. If Daddy George was a catspaw, perhaps the plotters would see to it that his gun was unloaded, to avoid taking any chance. It would be an easy matter for a couple of men to bind and gag the night watchman, without his getting a good look at them, he reflected. It was worth investigating, anyhow.

"I'm sort of interested in that gun of yours, sir," he said at length. "I'm more or less of a nut on guns—brought up on a ranch, you know. Mind if I look at it? Those big old-fashioned six-shooters aren't as common as they used to be."

"You bet they ain't. I've had these guns for thirty years or more—this here one's got a twin back to the house."

He handed Rex the gun. The flyer examined it casually.

"Mind if I take a shot at that old tin can there, just to see how she shoots?" he asked with a smile.

"Go ahead. Let's see what kind of a Texan you be," laughed Daddy George.

Rex cocked it and shot. There was a crack, all right, but no sign of a bullet hitting the ground. No dust was visible.

"Must've been a blank," said the surprised Daddy George. "That's funny. Try still another one."

Five more were tried—but they were all blanks.

"By gorry, that's sure a funny circumstance, ain't it?" queried Daddy George. "Bet a cooky the manufacturer got some blanks mixed in with the good shells. Mighty careless business, I'll say. S'pose somebody'd broke in the store some night, and me blazin' away at 'em with blanks!"

"If I were you I'd write the manufacturer. It might mean the difference between life and death some time. I've seen one bad shell in a lot, but never so many."

As he returned the gun the flyer's mind was racing. It was almost a sure thing now—and

he would be on the spot when the cap was blown off.

"Well, thanks for the company and the information about the gun," said Daddy George as they approached the store from the rear. They had walked across lots during the last part of the trip, to save time. "I'll git me some shells in the store and load up ag'in."

"Good night, sir. See you again," chorused the flyers.

"Jack, that cinches it cold as a herring," Rex said as they walked toward the hotel. "Those blanks were planted in Daddy George's gun, of course. That means he isn't in it. They'll just put him out of the way, and they put in the blanks to make things sure if he should happen to get a chance to shoot. He won't get the chance, I'm sure. They'll just wallop him with a piece of wood or something, or maybe bind and gag him in the dark store so he can't tell who they are—or maybe just one man will do the job."

"If he should get a chance to shoot—"

"He's an old-timer and there'll probably be one dead crook," said Rex grimly. "We're going to be right on the job around that store,

Jack—out of sight somewhere on the outside. We can't work too fast—remember it's possible we're all wrong. If we're right, we've got to be careful to keep clear of the frame-up. We'll be outside, without them knowing it, ready to horn in at the right time. What say?"

"It's the best way, all right. Poor old Daddy George is in for some excitement, I guess."

"Maybe, but we couldn't warn him. You see how he worships Weston; he wouldn't believe it, and remember we're taking a lot for granted. However, he's in no danger. I'm sure Weston wouldn't have consented to anything that would harm the old man. He'll just be carefully put out of the way."

Back at the hotel, Correll reported that he had had no luck in finding the boy—that he would not be back from Acacia until late. When the big non-com heard what Rex had to tell he nodded, his face alight.

"We've got 'em, I do believe," he said. "Go to it, lieutenant, and—help anybody that comes roving in the hotel tonight!"

CHAPTER XIV

WESTON CONFESSES

Daddy George puttered around in the shadows of the big store, covering it slowly from end to end. It was nearly nine o'clock, and only the light that came through the open door of the office illuminated the long stretch of floor space and counters. The old watchman usually stayed in the office, but tonight Mr. Weston was working late, and so Daddy George spent his time out in the store to avoid bothering him.

The old man was immersed in contented musing. It was a source of great pride to him to feel that he was worthy of a responsible position in his old age. He had served a good apprenticeship for taking care of James Weston's property, he thought for the thousandth time. He patted the long-barrelled, old-fashioned six-shooter, as he thought back to the days when he had lived the life of the Southwest with all the abandon of hearty, care-

less youth. He had reloaded his gun upon entering the store.

The old man was dozing off on a pile of blankets when the tall, masked figure of Blackie Stearns slipped in the back door of the office. Mr. Weston, his face gaunt and haggard, started as nervously as if the visit were not expected. Stearns had a drawn gun in his hand for effect. He was swathed in a long coat, but puttees could be glimpsed beneath it.

"Daddy George!" screamed Mr. Weston just as Stearns took hold of him, and like a flash the old man awoke in time to see Stearns throw the apparently lifeless body of the storekeeper to the floor.

Everything was dim to the nearsighted night watchman, but he could make things out vaguely as he started for the office, his pace slow, perforce but his spirit unafraid.

Stearns abstracted the thousand dollars from the safe during the few seconds which it took Daddy George to get to the office door. The night watchman was glad of the fortunate chance through which he had found out about the blanks, and reloaded.

The old man, panting hard, got to the office

door as Stearns was apparently trying to get out the door. The night watchman, his hand trembling, pulled the trigger. A searing iron seemed to be pressed for an instant against Stearns' arm.

The murderer of Bogie Bill saw red. The pain, the flash-like thought that darted into his mind of a double-cross, the staggering surprise of his wound, all contributed to the swift uprush of ungovernable rage that made his sullen face terrible in its fury. In an instant he had shot Daddy George through the heart.

The old man lay in the flickering lamp light, the gushing blood staining the end of his long white beard.

Mr. Weston, who had been lying on the floor, as was his part, leaped to his feet as the last shot reverberated through the room. With a hysterical cry that was like some wild beast's he leaped for his desk drawer, where he kept his own gun. He never reached it. Stearns dropped him with a shot through the back.

Swiftly as it had come the murderous rage was past, but once again the die was cast for Blackie Stearns. An explanation would do no good—it was time to blow, reflected Stearns

with pounding heart but curiously cool mind. He shuddered as though with a chill as he thought of the cold, massive chief upstairs. Like a shadow he slipped out the door, the thousand dollars still in his pocket. In one hand he clutched the Air Service insignia that had been filched from Lee's room and which Stearns had been planning to drop in the store office.

He had no sooner left and faded into the shadows in the back than Rex Lee and Carruthers burst into the office. They had hidden underneath the loading platform. The pistol cracks had come so fast that the whole thing was over before they could reach the office. Stearns had not been a second too soon.

"Hell! The watchman and Mr. Weston!" breathed Carruthers, shrinking instinctively from the horrible sight the office presented.

Rex dropped quickly beside Mr. Weston. The merchant's eyes opened and the twitching lips smiled.

"What happened, Mr. Weston?" demanded Rex. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Through the back, and it's bad," breathed Mr. Weston. "Is—Daddy George—"

"He's dead, Mr. Weston," Carruthers told

him gently. "And I'm going for a doctor right now."

He bolted out, leaving Rex to support the gray head of the storekeeper in his arms. He stanched the flow of blood as best he could with a handkerchief held tightly to the wound.

"Are you too weak to tell me what happened?" Rex asked eagerly. "We—"

The door burst open and the fat form of Vancouver B. Dale entered the office. As the marshal took in the tableau his heavy, flushed face went gray and he shrank away with stark fear and horror showing in every lineament of his face.

"My—my—!" he whispered.

"The game is up, Van," Mr. Weston told him.

The thin, lined face seemed more peaceful now, and the sunken eyes were not so feverishly bright. As they rested on the body of Daddy George there was an instant when they seemed to flash with bitter wrath. The white-haired old man had given his life to the patron who was so unworthy of his devotion. Mr. Weston's eyes sought Lee's face. Perhaps it was yet possible, somewhat.

"As soon as the doctor comes, and gives me a hypodermic or something, there are many things I want to tell you, boy," he said gently, and the sunken eyes roved to Dale's pasty face.

Dale, who was literally paralyzed at the unexpected trend of events, came to life with a snap.

"No, no, Mr. Weston. You can't be going to—"

"I'm going to tell Lee everything I know," stated the weakening Weston with unmistakable solemnity. "Hadn't you better get out after Stearns, Dale? You needn't be afraid—there'll be just two names in the confession—Fitzpatrick's and mine. Oh, yes, and Stearns."

Without a word Dale left. Rex held Mr. Weston, stanching the wound as best he could, his mind awhirl with the possible consequences of that night. Evidently there had been some hitch in arrangements, resulting in the death of innocent old Daddy George and probably of Mr. Weston. The wound was very bad.

The sound of a motor was heard outside, and in a moment the doctor came hurrying in. A glance at Daddy George told him the truth, and it only took a short examination of Mr. Wes-

ton's wound to make him shake his head sadly, his hard face softening a trifle as he said simply—

"About half an hour, Jim."

"I—I'm glad!" whispered Mr. Weston. "Can you give me something so I can talk a little louder?"

The doctor nodded and prepared a hypodermic.

"I'm going to dictate something to you, Lieutenant Lee, and sign it. You and the doctor can witness it. We must hurry. You'll find paper and pencil on the desk."

Before beginning to write, Rex got some blankets from the store. With one he covered the peaceful face of Daddy George, and with the others he made Mr. Weston a little more comfortable. Then he began to write at the wounded man's dictation. He had just started when the door opened and Corinne, with Carruthers supporting her, entered and threw herself on her knees beside her father, who smiled faintly as he looked up into her eyes.

She did not burst into a storm of weeping. Her drawn face and the pitiful look in her eyes gave quiet evidence of her grief. Apparently

Carruthers had told her what had happened, for she made no attempt to talk to him.

After the hypodermic had been injected and the wound bandaged by the quiet doctor Mr. Weston started to talk. Carruthers knelt on the other side of the wounded man, and the doctor leaned against the safe. Rex sat at the desk to write down Mr. Weston's words. No one there saw Searles, as he stood outside the window for a moment and watched the tableau, shadowed eerily by the dim oil lamp. His eyes rested longest on the motionless body of Daddy George. In a moment he vanished again, seeking Dave Fitzpatrick.

"Don't write this, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Weston slowly, as if he were picking his words very carefully. "For years I have lived when it would have been more merciful could I have died. I am going to try to atone a little now—God knows how hard it is going to be to tell the story with you here, daughter."

He smiled faintly as he looked up into her eyes. Her gaze did not falter, and her hand continued to stroke his hot brow slowly.

"I got into the power of Dave Fitzpatrick when my wife became very ill and I went in

debt. I took some money from the bank, to speculate with. I lost, as usual, and was facing sure conviction as an embezzler, immediately after Ruth died, when Fitzpatrick made good the shortage, but forced me to sign a confession, which he still holds. The details of the story are too long and various for my strength, but suffice it to say that I am in Ausman—I am what I am—because of the events that started with that moment when I stole money to try and save the life of my wife."

He stopped a moment, a far-away look in his sunken eyes.

"I am going to bare all I know of the man who has dragged me down—held me in iron bands until I am a broken thing that has no right to be called a man. Now you can begin to write, lieutenant."

Line by line Lee's pen traveled over the paper, and the story it wrote held few surprises for either Carruthers or Rex. Lee's deductions had been close to the truth. It told of Mr. Weston's position as local representative for Dave Fitzpatrick. The town was practically owned by him—most of the original inhabitants had been bought out or forced out. The

Mexicans had been imported, and cultivated the fields that were Fitzpatrick's. They were compelled to do their trading at the so-called "Weston Store," and in addition the women made baskets, strings of beads and other sorts of Mexican curios which the store shipped to various dealers in different parts of the country. With every shipment went thousands of dollars' worth of opium, morphine, heroin and other drugs, smuggled into Ausman from a small vessel which Fitzpatrick owned. It plied out of various ports in Mexico, and the contraband was transferred to launches out in the Gulf. Each curio dealer was a Fitzpatrick agent.

By every conceivable means the drugs were carried out of Ausman to points of distribution. In personal suitcases and trunks, in automobiles, even by express and freight, packed in shipments from the store, the stuff was spread over the country.

The curio camouflage was the best, of course, because the most extensive. So large had the business grown that there were plans under way to start a small factory wherein blankets, baskets, headdresses, shawls, mantillas and

other articles would be made systematically, and the output provide a legitimate excuse for large and frequent shipments which would be the channels for the largest dealing in drugs the United States ever knew.

Mr. Weston did not mention names, aside from Fitzpatrick's, but it was easy to see from the inferences of his halting tale that the law, the business, the very spirit of the town was Dave Fitzpatrick. With the exception of a very few people, whose eyes remained tight shut to what was going on about them, every white person in the town was in some way or other under Fitzpatrick's power. One by one the few people who had originally settled in Ausman had been driven out by fair means or foul—a few of them had disappeared completely.

Year by year the project had grown, and from its inception Mr. Weston had been the business head of it, representative of Fitzpatrick. Never for a moment had he forgotten the baleful influence under which he lived, and steadily he had gone deeper into the morass as Fitzpatrick's hand had pushed him down. The climax was right there in his office, with Daddy

George lying dead beside him, he himself approaching death, and his daughter listening to the tale of his utter unworthiness from his own lips.

He was perceptibly weakening as he raised his eyes to Rex, quietly writing at the desk.

"Boy, there is—is so little I can say except this, that I pray may help you. I have told you the story of the plot that was hatched against you by the man who is sitting upstairs right now."

Rex started, and Carruthers went white. Then Rex resumed his position facing the desk as he asked gently:

"Is there any more, sir?"

"Yes. If it will help you any, I hereby state that I know that Fitzpatrick is your enemy and that in El Paso months ago he tried to get you in his power, and again here he tried to ruin you. I know almost nothing of Fitzpatrick's operations outside of Ausman—perhaps you yourself know more than I. Now it is my firm belief that if you yourself or the man with you did not know that the opium was in your ship when you became notorious a few weeks ago, after it was found, that Fitzpatrick is at the

bottom of it. I base my ideas from the words of men I know are his henchmen, and know more than I. God knows I would have no reason—no reason—"

He could not finish. The doctor injected another hypodermic.

"Quick, let me sign it!" demanded the fast sinking man, and with the last of his strength he wrote a bold "James Weston" at the bottom of the last sheet.

Carruthers held him up while he watched the doctor and Rex witness it, and then the doctor held him while Carruthers added his signature.

He was just finishing it when a great sob came from Corinne. Mr. Weston was dead.

"Take Miss Corinne away, Jack," Rex said gently.

He turned to the doctor.

"Leave everything to me, lieutenant," the doctor said.

He looked around quickly, and then leaned over until his mouth was close to Lee's ear.

"I've lived in this town for ten years, and thought I knew something about it, but so help me, I'm astounded, sir, astounded!"

Lee wondered just how much surprised the medico was.

"I'll leave it to you, then," he said deliberately. "I've got some business upstairs."

His Army Colt was in his belt. He walked to the door unhurriedly. The doctor watched him in amazement as he disappeared into the darkness. He got a momentary impression of a clean-cut face and well-shaped head outlined sharply against the night as Rex inched the door shut from the outside.

The professional man drew a deep breath. He would not have gone upstairs for any reward he could think of, right then.

CHAPTER XV

THE SHOWDOWN

As Searles slowly ascended the stairs after his brief look at the tableau in the office, there was but one thought in his mind. He had come down at Fitzpatrick's behest to find out whether matters were progressing satisfactorily. He had seldom been as completely dumbfounded as when he looked in the window and saw Weston and Daddy George on the floor, and the two flyers in the office with them.

How matters had gone wrong did not interest him now, but the picture of the white-bearded old man, his thin worn face peaceful in death, affected the outlaw strangely. The gentle old fellow had been for many years the one touch of friendship in a lonely life, and Searles had not realized just how important a factor in his life the occasional peaceful visits to the old-timer had come to be.

He opened the door of Fitzpatrick's room, but did not enter. He leaned against the door-

jamb and slowly rolled a cigaret. Fitzpatrick, his massive figure sunk in a chair, waited for him to speak.

"Well, Dave, Lee's slipped you again, I reckon," Searles said, finally striking a match as he spoke.

Fitzpatrick did not move or speak. Not by so much as the winking of an eye did he manifest surprise or chagrin.

"The night watchman is laying down in the office, dead. Weston is badly hurt. He'll kick off in a few minutes, probably. His daughter, them two flyers, and the doctor is down there with 'em."

Fitzpatrick's light gray eyes did not change expression, and yet the cold, all-pervading wrath of the man seemed to change the air of the room. He was terrible in his repression.

The tranquil Searles inhaled a deep draft of smoke and blew it out slowly. His puckered eyes rested on Fitzpatrick's face. He was not at all uncomfortable now—he felt suddenly as if he were free of a burden, although he knew that never in ten years had the motionless man before him been as dangerous as he was then.

"What went wrong?" asked Fitzpatrick.

His voice ended flatly at the last word. It was more like a statement than a question.

Searles shrugged his shoulders.

"Stearns must have lost his temper or something—I dunno. How the flyers come to be there, instead o' Lee bein' up to the shack, I likewise can't figure. Guess you got a little sympathy for the men that tried to get Lee before, ain't you? Beers and Weasel—"

"Don't talk so much, Searles. You—"

"I'm aimin' to talk a mouthful now, Dave. I'm quitting—tonight."

There was an interval of a full minute after Searles made his casual announcement. It was a battle of eyes and wills. Fitzpatrick's unwinking gaze did not make Searles' eyes waver, nor did the uncanny force of his chief's will affect him at all.

"You are forgetting, Searles," said Fitzpatrick evenly.

"I'm not forgetting a damn thing," Searles contradicted. "Do your worst, Dave. This fool bug you got to get an upstandin' youngster like Lee never did set so well with me—he never done nothin' to you. And when I saw old Daddy George laying down there on the floor,

I made up my mind I was through dirtyin' up my hands with your brand o' crookedness any more. *Sabe?*"

"All right, Searles. And you know too much to be surprised at anything that happens."

The depth of hate and venomous determination that somehow was apparent in the colorless words did not surprise Searles, nor did it affect him. He answered as quietly as his former chief had spoken.

"Anything that figures to happen to me had better come shootin' Dave," he stated, and his eyes spoke volumes. "And just let me rise to announce this—that if I figure I'm gonna get caught, I'm just as willin' to hang for a sheep as a lamb. So if you aim to work on me, work faster than my guns."

There was another interval of silence, during which Searles smoked while he watched Fitzpatrick imperturbably. Finally he threw away his cigaret butt and straightened up.

"Well, I'm blowin' Dave. So long. I ain't much on killin' innocent old men—never was. And by the way, if what I saw downstairs ain't misleading, Weston is tellin' everything he

knows. You're liable to be findin' that Lee's got something on you."

Fitzpatrick's eyes, a certain snakelike quality in them, watched the short, bow-legged figure of his right-hand man disappear down the hall. If the tumbling down of his house of cards in Ausman affected him, a physical outlet for his wrath seemed unnecessary, for he remained as motionless as always in his big chair, his eyes resting on the blank wall in front of him without a flicker or expression in them. Rex Lee, creeping quietly down the hall, found him thus as he appeared in the open doorway, some clothes line in one hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Fitzpatrick," greeted the pilot, his broad shoulders almost filling the doorway.

Fitzpatrick did not answer. He must have known instantly who Rex was, but if he was surprised he gave no sign. The two men who had been waging warfare against each other for months, met for the first time, face to face.

"I'm here on a very salubrious errand," Rex went on. "I can't forbear saying a few things of a personal nature right at the start of

my call. You'll pardon me if I get personal, won't you?"

The flyer's speech was slow, his attitude almost lazy, but the fire that showed through in his eyes was the fierce joy of battle against the enemy he had come to hate with a hatred that was the culmination of months. His passages-at-arms with Fitzpatrick had been like a game of wits at first—a game that he enjoyed with the reckless delight of the Lees pitting themselves against odds for the pure satisfaction of the struggle. Lately he had come to appreciate the relentless enmity, utter lack of scruple, and far-reaching power of Fitzpatrick. The two dead men down in the office—Rex could barely hold himself back from leaping at the stony bulk in the chair, although his outward air of carelessness did not betray his feelings.

"Apparently you aren't feeling conversational this evening," the pilot went on slowly. "So before I tie you up—did I forget to tell you I was going to tie you up?—I just wanted to say that of all the murdering, double-crossing, utterly contemptible coyotes I ever met, you're the worst. I'd give a year's pay to lick

you with my bare hands, and have dad looking on."

There was something deadly in his words, and Fitzpatrick seemed a statue of incarnate venom. Perhaps he had come to hate the son as he had the father—perhaps merely because he was the son of the father.

"Now we're going to tie you up and lead you away and keep you safe until Mr. Weston's confession gets into the proper hands," drawled Rex. "Having paid you my compliments let's go."

He had just started for Fitzpatrick when the smuggler got into action. As if shot from a gun the bulky body shot from the chair, and Fitzpatrick hurled himself at the flyer. Rex had no chance to pull his gun—would not have done so if he could. He welcomed the opportunity for physical conflict with a mirthless smile and blazing eyes.

He met Fitzpatrick's rush with a straight left that numbed his hand, but it did not seem to affect his opponent. Perhaps because it was his only chance to escape, perhaps because of the terrible anger that filled him as the ruin of

all his plans loomed before him, Fitzpatrick seemed to possess maniacal strength and endurance. The bulky body was as made of stone, as far as the effect of Lee's blows were concerned.

Rex fought coolly, his back to the door. He had the longer reach, but his blows did not make his enemy falter. In a few seconds Fitzpatrick succeeded in getting to close quarters. In a bear-like hug his two great arms met around Lee's body.

With awful strength the arms kept closing tighter about Rex, and little by little Fitzpatrick forced him to bend backward. The smuggler's eyes were expressionless, his big square face a mask. It was like being in the folds of a boa constrictor.

Beads of sweat came out on Lee's face as with all his strength he fought the relentless pressure that was forcing him farther and farther backward until the pain was horrible. It could last but a few more seconds. Rex, his breath coming in gasps, gathered himself for a last effort. With his hands he exerted all the pressure he could against Fitzpatrick's body.

It was not much, for his arms were bound

tightly to his side by Fitzpatrick's grip. As he did so he strove to bend sidewise. All the reserve force in his big body went into the torturing effort. The veins in his forehead stood out like welts, but inch by inch he succeeded in bending his opponent with him, to the right. Finally both men fell; Fitzpatrick's grip loosened a trifle as his wrist took most of the force of the fall. In a flash Rex got loose and was on his feet.

Fitzpatrick was after him, his big form moving with the speed of a panther. He aimed a terrible blow at Lee—a right swing. Rex used an old trick he had learned in his college gymnasium. Quick as a cat he bent from the waist, under the blow. As he did so his left foot went forward and with all the force of his body behind it his right hand sunk in Fitzpatrick's stomach.

It seemed as if that blow should have finished him. It did weaken him—for a second or two he staggered. Lee's gun clanged to the floor. It had hopped out of his belt as he bent downward.

It bounced under the table, and Fitzpatrick was after it in an instant. He was not quite

soon enough. Even as his hand was closing on it Lee's foot caught his wrist, and the gun went spinning to the wall.

Fitzpatrick got to his feet, to be met with a straight smash that knocked him down once more. As he got up, he put one hand on the back of a chair as if to help himself. Without warning he swung the chair, so quickly that a leg grazed Lee's cheek as he leaped back. It left a red line across one side of his face.

Fitzpatrick went off balance by the force of his swing, and Lee rushed in with a vicious one-two with left and right that sent his opponent staggering to the wall.

It was uncanny the way the man kept his feet. He had scarcely touched Lee except for the horrible moment when he had succeeded in getting his grip and bending him backward, but the long-armed Rex had landed a dozen blows on Fitzpatrick that carried with them all the force of his superb body, and yet the outlaw kept on.

He rushed again, and once more Rex succeeded in landing a stomach blow. It weakened Fitzpatrick perceptibly. For a half-minute he fought weakly, weathering a storm of blows to

the face that left it crimson with blood. And still, with terrible persistence and endurance, he bored in, striving to obtain a body grip once more.

Finally Rex got his chance. He sent Fitzpatrick against the table with a blow under the ear, and for a moment the smuggler hung there, the lamp swaying perilously. Rex put the last of his ebbing strength into two more blows to the stomach, and Fitzpatrick sank to the floor limply.

The flyer staggered against the table, his breath coming in great gasps. He steadied himself for a moment, and then slowly got the rope which he had dropped by the door, and tied Fitzpatrick's hands and feet. The narrowed, opaque eyes were open, but the great body was momentarily paralyzed. Rex used his handkerchief to wipe the blood from his enemy's face. This done, he got to his feet and buttoned his O.D. shirt, which had been ripped open in the mêlée. He looked down at Fitzpatrick.

" 'You're a poor benighted heathen, but a first-class fighting man,' " he quoted.

He picked up his Colt and went out. He was bound for the street to find Vancouver B. Dale.

He wondered whether they had succeeded in apprehending Stearns. Somehow or other he did not have much confidence in the ability of the Ausman sleuth.

On the stairs he saw the doctor. That gentleman was standing on the bottom platform. Apparently he had been on his way for help to dispose of the bodies within, and had stopped to listen to the noise from above.

"Had a little scrap," Rex told him as he passed.

The street was quite dark. Only the tiny, dirty Mexican restaurant showed a light in its windows. Inside there were at least fifteen men, a few of them Mexicans, talking excitedly. Evidently everyone was familiar with the principal events of the evening.

Further on, sounds of excited discussion reached Lee's ears from within Balavo's place. Rex, obeying a sudden impulse, tried the doors in front. They opened, and he walked in.

There were twenty or more men in the barroom. A couple of Mexican girls stood in the doorway that led into the big room in the rear. Vancouver B. Dale was among the men, all of whom appeared to have been drinking. Silence

fell suddenly as the tall Army man appeared, his thick brown hair in crazy disorder.

"Did you get Stearns?" he demanded of Dale.

"Not yet. There's three posses out looking for him," stammered Dale.

"You're a fine marshal," stated the flyer without heat, his hands stuck negligently in his back pockets. "Come on out, will you? I've got a little job for you."

"I was getting another posse in here," Dale said apologetically.

The events of the evening had made him uncertain of his position—extremely uncertain. He followed Rex out like a lamb.

"I've got Dave Fitzpatrick roped and hog-tied, and I want you to put him in the lock-up, do you understand?"

They were walking along the street toward the store. The marshal stopped dead in his tracks as Lee's words sank in his brain.

"Put him in the lock-up?" he gulped, his voice ludicrously cracked.

"Right," returned Rex.

"I—I—"

"I don't know just where you stand, Dale,

but I don't believe you're precisely sitting on top of the world in this deal," Rex said slowly, his eyes on the marshal's face. "If you want to do as much for yourself as you can, you'd better do as I say."

The shot went home. Without a word they started once more for the store.

"Oh, Rex!" came Carruthers' voice from down the street.

Jack came running down from the corner.

"Have they got Stearns?" he asked eagerly.

"No—the demon policeman here hasn't sleuthed him yet," returned Rex.

"Anything happened since I left?"

"Considerable," answered Rex. "We'll let old Fitzpatrick lay for a while and think it over. Seat yourselves for a while and let's have a smoke."

Dale refused a cigaret, but Carruthers and Lee lit up. Rex told the story of his interview with Fitzpatrick briefly, to Carruthers' vast delight and Dale's unaffected horror.

"And to think I missed it!" mourned Carruthers.

"You sure missed a show. My back is still sore where he threw about half the vertebræ

out of joint. I'll be having one of those chiropractors jumping on it, I'll bet, before she gets lined up again. How is Miss Weston?"

"Pretty bad, Rex. That housekeeper of theirs seems to be a pretty good scout, though. I left Corinne with her."

"I wonder if she's got any relatives or anybody to live with?"

"Not a one, the housekeeper told me."

Carruthers did not say so, but he had plans along that line himself.

"Well, let's get Fitzpatrick incarcerated," Rex suggested, throwing away his half-smoked cigaret.

"You mean jail?" asked Carruthers.

"The very same. I was just trying to fool Sherlock Holmes here."

Dale smiled a sickly smile. Rex led the way upstairs, and into the room where Fitzpatrick, bound securely, was stretched flat on the floor. Dale was ludicrously ill at ease. His eyes refused to meet the stony gaze of the man who had been the law and the prophets to him for years.

Rex inspected the fussed officer of the law with a grin on his face.

"Constable, I'm not so darn confident, someway, in the honesty of your intentions. In fact, I am frankly scared still that your natural kindness of heart may hamper you in your official duties. I'm going to overthrow the law this once and put a guard of my own around the jail house. What do you think, Jack?"

"Good idea," agreed Jack.

"Now listen here!" blustered Dale, "you can't—"

"I know we can't, but we're going to. *Sabe,* brother?"

Dale's eyes fell before the level regard of the tall flyer, whose purpose was very apparent beneath the gentle drawl. The marshal's world was topsy-turvy that night; his chief a bound prisoner, Weston dead, a confession from Weston that included he did not know how much—and the inherent weakness of the man capitulated to Lee.

Rex untied Fitzpatrick's feet and helped him up. He drew his Colt and spun it in his hand.

"Now, Fitzpatrick, just a little word. Naturally what you have tried to do to me hasn't caused me to consider you any friend of mine. So walk just where and how I tell you to, or

I'll shoot you like the poisonous rattlesnake that you are!"

No one could have looked at Rex and doubted his sincerity. Fitzpatrick walked slowly out the door. Rex walked behind him down the hall, Dale and Carruthers bringing up the rear.

When they got to the street, Rex turned to Dale.

"Lead the way to your hoosegow, Dale," he said.

Dale led them to a small building behind the Mexican restaurant. The windows were barred, and the interior contained two cells, a hallway in front of them containing a table and a chair. Each cell had a cot and two blankets. Dale, after lighting a small kerosene lamp, opened one cell. As soon as the barred door swung open he shrank back against the wall, as if mortally afraid to go near the bound Fitzpatrick.

The smuggler walked in slowly. Rex himself loosened his hands, and clanged the door shut. Fitzpatrick sat down on the bed. His burly form assumed its wonted position, hands resting motionless on his knees. His eyes followed

Lee continually. Carruthers watched with a curious repulsion. He shivered at the quiescent venom and menace that seemed to compose the aura of Dave Fitzpatrick.

After the marshal had locked the cell door, Rex held out his hand.

"Mind giving me the key, Dale?" he inquired softly.

"Yes, I do!" stated Dale, stealing a quick look at Fitzpatrick for approval. "What right have you—"

"None, probably," returned Rex easily. "But here's what you're going to do. If Carruthers doesn't mind, he'll go up and get a hard-boiled sergeant that has been waiting for possible happenings up in my room at the hotel. Then you're going to swear that sergeant in as one of your assistants, deputies, posse-members or whatever you call 'em. In fact, he's going to be your chief assistant. And he's going to take charge of the keys and this prisoner. Probably it isn't strictly legal, but this town and this night aren't what you might call examples of legal procedure."

"I'll run down after Correll now," said Carruthers, and departed on his errand.

"Sheriff, I shouldn't be surprised if you rather hope that Stearns doesn't get caught. How about it?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" stammered the marshal, his eyes once more stealing toward Fitzpatrick.

The ghost of an unpleasant smile twisted the wide, thin gash that was Fitzpatrick's mouth.

"Well, of course Mr. Weston's confession, so to speak, didn't include you but it doesn't take many elaborate mental processes to connect you up with Fitzpatrick's operations in Ausman," Rex answered judicially. "Thoroughness appears to be one of your prisoner's chief assets in his business."

The sheriff was squirming like an eel. He didn't know just where he stood with the soft-spoken pilot who was so surprisingly delegating to himself much authority.

"Now, if Stearns should be caught he might talk, and if he talked you might be in an—er—embarrassing position, eh, Sherlock?" proceeded Rex mercilessly.

Dale's fleshy, gross face was beaded with sweat, and he licked his thick lips with a tongue that was almost as dry as they were.

"However, maybe I can persuade you to rout out the telegraph operator and send wires to the county sheriff, and the chiefs of police in Victoria, Corpus Christi, and some other near-by points. Stearns won't have a chance to get away by railroad, and I doubt whether he knows enough about boats to risk them—he wouldn't have gone through the center of town anyway, having lost the protection of his benefactor here."

Rex looked at Fitzpatrick as he finished speaking, meeting the stony glare of his enemy imperturbably.

"Fitzpatrick, a man licked in a square fight deserves only respect and sympathy. But so help me, if there's any varieties of way to rub it in that I don't find for your special benefit, tell me about it."

Footsteps came to the ears of the three waiting men, and in a moment Carruthers entered, with Correll's huge form looming up behind him. The grizzled sergeant's face wore a smile that split from ear to ear as he surveyed Fitzpatrick leisurely.

"Well, well, old scout, how does she feel?"

he chuckled. "Lieutenant, it must 'a' been a large evening for you."

"Sizable, Correll, sizable," grinned Rex. "Did Carruthers tell you that you were going to be a deputy marshal, or whatever they call the town policeman, for the night?"

"He did. I'm breakin' in on a good prisoner, too," returned Correll.

"All kidding aside, though, you may be a little up against it, at that. I don't know just how the men that have been working for this double-cross artist here feel toward him. I imagine that they haven't any personal affection for him, and that most of them will be tickled to death to see him out of the way. But there's just a chance that there may be a rescue party formed. I'll be back here as soon as the constable and I send off a few wires about this Stearns, and a few more to dad and the Texas Rangers and a few more places. Two guns may be better than one."

"We'll be ready," stated Correll.

"No reason why I can't hang around, is there?" inquired Jack.

"None at all. Thought you might be a little

tired. I believe I'll leave Weston's last statement with you, Jack. Someone might take a notion to roll me for it, even under the protection of the law."

He handed Jack the closely-written pages that constituted a fragmentary but convincing tale of Fitzpatrick's ten-year conquest of Ausman.

"Does that confession give Fitzpatrick hell, lieutenant?" asked the sergeant eagerly.

Fitzpatrick himself deigned to turn his head a trifle and look at Rex as he answered slowly:

"Enough. It's plenty to rope and hog-tie him, as far as that's concerned. I guess all Weston knew we know, now, and it'll be a good start for more. Jack told you about the frame they had ready and waiting for me to step into, didn't he?"

Correll nodded, his face dark and forbidding as he looked at Fitzpatrick.

"I'm liable to remember it if there's any funny work, too," he said, his eyes boring into the opaque ones that refused to allow a glimmer of expression to show in them.

"I'm somewhat hazy, as I said before, about the propriety of the Air Service becoming the

law in Ausman, but swear him in, Sherlock," said Rex.

For a moment it seemed as if Dale was about to balk again. It did not take him long to decide that the odds were all against him, however, and in a moment Sergeant Correll was a full-fledged deputy, and a statement in writing to that effect, signed with a shaky "Vancouver B. Dale, peace officer, Ausman, Texas," was in his hands to back up his claim should anyone doubt his authority.

"I'll be back after the police force and I send some telegrams," Rex said as he opened the door.

Dale followed him out slowly. An hour sufficed to rout out the maiden lady who acted as ticket agent and telegraph operator for Ausman, convince her of the importance of the occasion and dispatch many messages. After lending his official presence to this laudable though unpleasant duty, Dale departed thankfully. It may be added that he departed with a completeness that was almost astounding in an officer of the law with an important criminal at large and another one in his toils. Ausman never saw him more.

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER THE STORM

"I JUST happened to think of it. I think we'd better call around early and see her. She sure is a game little girl, isn't she?"

It was Lee speaking. He was seated on the floor of the little jail, his back against the wall. He showed no marks of an all-night vigil or of the fast succession of events—some of them distinctly energetic from a physical as well as a mental standpoint—of the previous evening.

"You're right, Rex. I shouldn't be surprised if it was going to be up to us to help her over some of the hard places in the next few days. There's really nobody much here—a couple of women, probably, but no one to take the work off her shoulders."

Carruthers, slumped down in the chair, showed the marks of sleeplessness plainly. His handsome face was rather drawn, and his eyes had deep black rings around them. His curly hair was in a remarkably unkempt condition.

"Corinne has had more hard luck than comes to most girls," resumed Jack, warming up to his favorite topic. "It was hard enough for a girl like her to be cooped up in a place like this, and then to find that her father was a Fitzpatrick crook—"

He glanced through the bars at the heavy, motionless figure of the ex-border monarch. Fitzpatrick, fully dressed, was stretched on the bed. It was impossible to tell whether he was asleep or not.

"I felt a lot of sympathy for the old man, though, at that," said Rex. "Fitzpatrick hits below the belt, and it's no disgrace to go down under that kind of fighting."

He got to his feet leisurely and blew out the flickering oil lamp.

"Methinks the beams of the early morn will be enough until the trusty sergeant arrives," he remarked as he resumed his restful position on the floor.

"Said beams of the early morn are welcome," Carruthers assured him, stifling a yawn.

They had dispatched Correll to get some sleep, so that he could guard Fitzpatrick during the day. The slight break in legal procedure

by which the deputy slept while total outsiders guarded the jail did not bother them. It was the twentieth century but in the last few hours such things as law, courts, and divers other civilized institutions had receded into the background.

"I can't help but feel as though I was mixed up in Daddy George's death, somehow," said Rex slowly, his face very serious as he gazed straight ahead of him.

It was the first time he had mentioned it, although it had been in his mind off and on ever since the events of the evening before.

"I can understand how you feel, but, if it was your fault I'm a shavetail in the Quartermaster Corps," declared Jack. "Of course you helped him discover the blank cartridges, but he might have done that anyway. And there's no guarantee that his change to real bullets was responsible for his death, although I admit that probably it's the truth. But there's no way under heaven you could have figured it, Rex."

"I know—with our information as sketchy and ill founded as it was, I believe we did the only possible thing, but—"

"Perhaps it's better the old man died, anyhow, Rex. There wouldn't have been much left in life after this blew over."

"Maybe not."

"Corinne is going to need a brotherly lift—" Jack said, in an effort to change the subject. Rex interrupted him.

"All lifts labeled brotherly I'll look out for," he said with a quizzical grin. "I wonder how she's going to be fixed on money? Didn't you say she didn't have any relatives or close friends?"

"Not a one. She's been marooned here, except for a couple of years at school, ever since she's been old enough to make any friends. She's only twenty."

"Well, if she'll let us I guess maybe we can fix her up a little some way."

They fell silent, each man apparently immersed in his own thoughts. Jack was thinking of the girl. Rex was thinking for the hundredth time of what the events of the preceding night meant to him.. There were many ramifications; he was under the impression that Fitzpatrick was a citizen of Mexico and not of the United States, for one, and he was not at

all sure of just what the possibilities of the situation were. Especially the high-and-mighty arrest.

Mr. Weston's confession did not clear up the cloud that hung over him on the charge of carrying opium, but it helped a great deal as a starting point to work from. It was about a fifty-fifty chance that both court martial and civilian jury would clear him, now that Fitzpatrick was not in much of a position to pull wires and keep the anti-Lee pot boiling up around San Antonio. If by any chance his father, to whom he had dispatched a long wire the night before, had unearthed anything down at McMullen, chances for an acquittal that would clear his name completely were excellent.

He wondered how long it would be before the county sheriff arrived from Acacia. Unless he was badly mistaken, the sheriff would have a Texas ranger to help him after Lee, senior, arrived, which Rex was sure he would. In that case, the search for Blackie Stearns would be stimulated considerably. The pilot wondered who Stearns was.

"Must be a bad egg," he reflected with dark-

ening face as he thought of the bloody work of Stearns' hand and Fitzpatrick's mind.

Mr. Weston's death was bad enough, but somehow the thought of gentle, white-bearded old Daddy George stretched on the floor of the office, shot to death as an innocent pawn in a terrible game, affected Rex as it had everyone else, even Searles. Lee's natural elation at the lightening of the clouds around him was strongly tinged with bitter regret at the recollections that must always accompany the thought of Ausman.

The sun was well up when Correll arrived to relieve the two flyers. The sergeant was in fine fettle, and apparently looked forward to a day of association with Dave Fitzpatrick.

"We'll reminisce about the border," he remarked with a grin. "We got a lot of mutual acquaintances, ain't we, Fitz?"

Fitz didn't answer.

"How about food?" inquired Correll just before the others left.

"Buy him his meals at the spig refreshery," said Rex, giving the sergeant some money. "And warm him up a little. He hasn't been

very sociable up to now. *Adiós;* we'll probably be dropping by again before long."

They repaired to the hotel, drawing deep breaths of the cool morning air as they walked the short distance. The sun had a touch of red through the thin mist—it was going to be a blistering day.

"Well, after pruning the foliage and scrubbing up a bit, I'll sure be in shape to surround a couple of healthy eggs," remarked Rex as they ascended the veranda steps.

"I've got some whiskers to mow, likewise. Match you to see who's first in the so-called bathroom," returned Carruthers.

They stopped at the door, drew out coins, and matched. Jack won. Eventually Rex succeeded in compromising to the extent that he could bathe while Jack shaved, in order to accelerate breakfast.

The shave, followed by a bath—cold of necessity—in the superannuated tin tub, woke up Carruthers and increased Lee's desire for breakfast. Clean clothes from the skin out and a good breakfast—the one meal of the day that was above reproach in Mr. and Mrs. Smith's hostelry—completed the rehabilitation of the

flyers. At nine o'clock they set out for the Weston home.

The little white-haired housekeeper, her thin face showing signs of copious weeping, answered the door. The flyers told her they would wait out on the porch, and seated themselves on the lounge where they had talked with Corinne so often.

Soon she came out, dressed in a simple frock. Although her eyes showed dark circles and her lips quivered a bit as she greeted them, she seemed only a little more subdued and serious than usual.

"Miss Corinne—" began Rex, when she interrupted him.

"Please don't add the 'miss,' " she said with a pathetic little smile that hinted at her great need for friendship.

"All right, Corinne," said Rex. "There's just one thing we wanted to say this morning. Neither Jack nor I are much on excess talk, but we thought—we hoped—that it might make things a little easier for you if you knew that both of us are just hoping that we can show you a little bit of our sympathy by doing things for you. If it isn't too presumptuous to ask you to

look at us as your big brothers, and if you'll just ask us to take everything off your shoulders, we'll be happy as clams. There's never going to be a time or a circumstance that will alter our desire to do all we can for our nervy little newly adopted sister."

"And that goes the limit, too, Corinne," interjected Carruthers, his heart in his eyes as he looked at her. "You've got those friends and relatives we talked about last night, with a couple of hired men and caretakers thrown in for good measure, on your front porch right now!"

The girl's hand touched the flyer's for a moment in silent thanks. Her eyes, tear-filled in spite of herself, rose to meet Lee's.

"You don't—you can't know—somehow, thinking of father—"

Her self-control gave way, and she bowed her head in her arms. The broken arm, in a sling, lent an additional touch of pathos to the bowed head with its crown of glinting auburn hair.

"Corinne, of course there is really nothing one can say, I suppose," came Lee's voice gently, "but I'm sure that after the first shock

of your grief and your disillusion have passed that you'll see things more clearly than you do now, perhaps. If you'll pardon a personal reference, I've knocked around quite a lot, and I've learned one thing, I think—from what people have often thought of me as well as the reverse—and that is that there is seldom a broken life or a convict or a suicide that does not come as the result of happenings that would ofttimes break the very men and women who are the first to condemn.

"Your father stole money to try to save your mother's life. For years he has gone through hell, we all know, and I am sure that the only reason that he spent these weary years in Ausman was for your sake. And at the end he broke his own heart by deliberately disillusioning you to try and right the wrong he felt he'd done to an able-bodied man like me who doesn't amount to much anyway. Whether or not your father had been there, Fitzpatrick would have tried to get me. Whatever else he may have been forced to do, Mr. Weston was a loving father above all, and at the last a self-sacrificing man who did all he could without hope of reward."

Specious although some of his words might have been, they were effective. It was an older, more mature Rex Lee whose softly slurred words came with quiet sympathy and understanding to the pitifully friendless girl. The tears came faster, but they were the tears that relieve and do not intensify the pangs of sorrow.

Rex tactfully, little by little, drew the subject away from Mr. Weston.

Finally Corinne raised her head and smiled.

"I've been awfully silly, and I hope you'll excuse me, both of you," she said. "Both my —my brothers," she added shyly.

Before they left the flyers had taken full responsibility for funeral arrangements for Daddy George and Mr. Weston. They touched on Mr. Weston's affairs. None of the three had any idea as to what part, if any, of the store or its contents belonged to him.

Rex strolled down the walk slowly. He seized the opportunity when Carruthers asked for a drink.

Jack drank his water, and then took his hat. Corinne held out her hand to him in farewell, but for some reason her eyes wavered and fell.

"Corinne, please don't worry—about anything. What Rex said goes—every bit of it—and as far as I'm concerned it goes—well, what I mean is that it doesn't stop when all this is over, and—and—oh shoot, I can't say it now but I'm going to some day, and well—just don't worry, that's all!"

"Of all the—unmitigated, blithering asses!" groaned Jack as he walked swiftly toward Lee. "Good Lord, if ever a man—"

"Were you bound downtown to kill somebody or merely rehearsing a stinging denunciation of evolution?" grinned Rex.

"What do you mean?" inquired Jack, slowing up his rate of progress down the road.

"Your face read 'make it or bust' and your eye sure looked mean. Likewise, you were shaking a wicked pair of feet and pumping a mean pair of arms," Rex told him.

"Oh, I put my foot in it and was bawling myself out," admitted Carruthers sheepishly.

"I gathered that from the piercing pink of your cheeks. Cheer up, Jack. Unless all signs fail, you're soon going to put your foot in it even deeper!"

CHAPTER XVII

REX MEETS A BADMAN

THE sun-drenched field sent up shivery, ever-changing heat-waves that shimmered in blinding abundance. The two ships, staked down and covered, were at one end, and Rex walked slowly toward them. It was mid-afternoon, but he did not feel the need of sleep. He had walked out to make sure that the planes had not been tampered with. At six o'clock the evening train was due. If his wire had caught Lee, senior, at home he might be in on that train—the only incoming train of the day in Ausman.

Sheriff Smithers from Acacia had arrived at noon, via his official tin lizzie. He proved to be a small mean-looking man who looked and acted like a bad medicine to anyone he was after. He had found Rex and Correll at the jail, and waxed blasphemous as he read the authority Dale had given Correll.

"Where the devil is Dale?" he demanded.

"Haven't seen him since last night," Rex returned.

"What's he been doing about rounding up this murderer?"

"Nothing that I know of, and I shouldn't be surprised if the sergeant here represented the law as far as Ausman is concerned."

"I shouldn't be surprised either," admitted Smithers. "This Ausman has always been queer—I've been held down in various ways, and of late never got no complaints. Who's the prisoner?"

"Name of Dave Fitzpatrick," stated Rex, calmly.

"Not that *hombre* from the border?"

The sheriff talked in staccato phrases and gave the impression that he was operating on Rex with the third degree.

"The same," replied Rex, negligently rolling a cigaret.

"What for?"

"Read this and see. It's a confession from one of the murdered men, signed and witnessed before he died."

The sheriff grabbed the precious pieces of paper and started to read rapidly. In a mo-

ment he looked up at Rex and pushed his black felt hat lower over his eyebrows.

"Lee your name?" he asked.

Rex nodded.

"Lee, Lee. Let's see—say, are you the man that was caught smuggling opium up to Donovan Field?"

"Right."

"What are you doing down here?"

"None of your business, officially," returned Rex, who did not like the tone which the sheriff used.

"Don't be too sure of that," returned the unruffled sheriff. "Even if you are in the Army."

"Oh, I'm sure of that enough, but if you just want to know personally there are a couple of ships out here. One cracked up and I'm down, with the sergeant and another pilot, to bring it back. Satisfy you?"

"No. But then, it doesn't matter."

The sheriff finished reading Weston's confession, and then handed it back to Rex. Rex and Correll between them told him the story of succeeding events, and of their suspicions of Vancouver B. Dale.

Smithers, his dark face frowning viciously, chewed rapidly on a long stogie.

"Big stuff here. In view of the circumstances, I'd better phone up to Acacia for a big posse. Did you wire any other places?"

"Plenty," Rex answered, and named them over.

The sheriff nodded approvingly.

"I'll send some more, and include Dale in 'em," he announced. "I'll send Fitzpatrick back to Acacia. We got a jail there'll hold him. I've got two deputies outside. They'll take him back, lock him up, and boost along a big posse. I'll stay here and get busy, telegraph and telephone. May scare up a few men here."

Rex grinned as he inspected the ships leisurely and thought of Smithers. He had had no qualms whatever about handing Fitzpatrick into his charge. Smithers was nasty in his attitude, but he was every inch efficient. The town had been buzzing since his arrival, and undoubtedly many posses were scouring the surrounding country right then for Stearns. Word had been flashed far and wide already. Undoubtedly newspaper extras in San Antonio,

Dallas, Houston and El Paso were screaming the news of the double murder. If the information regarding Dave Fitzpatrick had been included, it would have been an honest-to-goodness sensation, reflected Rex.

The ship he and Carruthers had flown was in excellent shape, even to gas and oil. The radiator had not been filled, but there was still some water in it from the trip down. Rex almost decided to take a flight among the fleecy white clouds that marched slowly from the Gulf in never-ending rows of snowy white.

The wrecked ship was just as it had been left. Rex eased himself down to the ground and lay beneath a wing. The hum of a thousand insects sounded drowsily in his ears. He was forced to light a cigaret to keep the gnats from being bothersome—had it not been for that he would probably have dozed off into slumber.

He strove to think of anything he had left undone—there was nothing, but looking over Mr. Weston's papers, and he wanted his father there for that. He had wired Lee, senior, not from any particular need for him, but only because he was sure the old man would be tickled

to death to be in the middle of things—and undoubtedly would bring along with him a ranger or some other command and actually make things move toward the finding of the murderer of Daddy George and Mr. Weston. He had not known just how much the county sheriff would amount to in so important a case.

His thoughts grew more vague, and he drifted off into a blissful state of half-sleep and half wakefulness that speedily grew into sound sleep. How long he had slept he did not know, but he was awakened by a rude shaking. He awakened to look into the barrel of a perfectly good-looking gun. The owner thereof possessed a sullen-looking face that was positively repulsive now—a two-day stubble of black beard, blood-shot eyes and mouth that was twisted into a perpetual snarl from the strain of the last twenty-four hours.

"Get up and get busy," directed the man with the gun. "Quick!"

Rex rolled out from under the wing and sat up.

"What do you want, money?" he inquired easily.

"No. You and me are goin' for a ride over

the border, and if you value a whole hide you'll commence movin' right now."

Rex stood up and began to remove the propeller cover with apparent speed but actual slowness. His mind was casting around eagerly. In all probability this was Stearns—what was the best method of handling him, or trying to? A bluff about the ship not working would probably be effective, although risky.

The pilot tingled with the fierce elation that filled him. For days he had been keenly watchful, playing a dangerous game with all his might and with every realization of its importance. Now that was over, and the deliberate playing for high stakes, at great risk, which was the Lee habit, was the only thought he had now. Somehow or other he would gamble his all against Stearns, on the chance of getting the upper hand of the man who was holding a gun on him now.

"I don't see yet how you're going to make me carry you over the border," remarked Rex as he finally slipped off the propeller cover and started on the motor cover.

The dark face grew darker. Stearns was in no mood to be balked.

"You don't, eh?" He patted the gun meaningly. "I guess it won't hurt me none to have another man added to the score," he stated.

The rather debonair, sullenly handsome man of a day before had disappeared—apparently Stearns had roved around the entire night, because his face was cut, and scratched, his clothing slightly torn, and his eyes and face showed the effect of sleeplessness and nervous tension.

Rex hesitated for a moment—should he take a chance on what he was going to say next, for the sake of a plan that had leaped into his mind? In a flash he had made his decision, and his words came casually as he folded the engine cover.

"After we get in the air, what are you going to do?" he queried. "If I take a notion to fly where I want to, and you shoot me, you might just as well point the gun against your own head—you'll come down a lot faster than you went up with me a goner."

Stearns' face was horrible for a moment. He had almost given up hope when he had spotted the figure of a man near the ship, from some distance off. His plan for an airplane ride, providing the man was a pilot, had leaped into

his mind with heartening possibilities. Lee's last words dashed his hopes for a moment, and the awful temper that was the source of his present predicament convulsed the dark face with all-consuming wrath. Rex was never nearer death than he was for the space of a few seconds, while Stearns' finger itched on the trigger of the gun.

Some saving remnant of self-control, induced by the thought that his only hope of escape lay in the tall, careless pilot before him, kept Stearns from pulling the trigger. Rex had won his first point. The reddened eyes of the rider rested on the plane and, as they did, a light of fierce triumph leaped into them.

"I might be committing suicide to shoot you, mister," he sneered, "but there's other ways. I figure you wouldn't like to have an eye gouged out, now, would you?"

He worked his thumb with horrible meaning.

"So any time you get gay, just remember I'll be leanin' forward from the back seat there, and out comes an eye at the first sign of any o' your tricks. Savvy?"

Lee's eyes rested on the fifteen-inch cowling that separated back and front cockpits.

"I guess you've got me," he admitted. Strangely, though, he did not seem disappointed.

"Come on, get busy here and don't talk so much!" snapped Stearns, and Rex obeyed.

The rider's eyes roved around nervously. The nearest shack was a half-mile away. The big barn was deserted. Not a sign of human life except an automobile passing along the pike a quarter of a mile or more away was in sight to worry him and he relaxed somewhat.

"You're Stearns, aren't you?" inquired Rex as he busily pulled stakes and cut the knots in the stake-ropes.

"Ye-ah. You're Lee, ain't you?"

"Right. By the way, now that you've got me roped, there's no sense of being hard. Might as well be as pleasant as possible under the circumstances, both of us. If I was in your fix and had no smokes, I'd sure like one right now. How about it?"

The bold, bloodshot black eyes lit up eagerly. Had it not been that on either hand of Stearns Rex could see in his imagination the forms of Daddy George and Mr. Weston he might have had it in his heart to pity his captor.

He held out tobacco and papers. Stearns took them gingerly, his gun ever ready.

"Wait a minute till I shake you down," he ordered.

With gun pressed against the flyer he quickly searched him, and then stood him with his hands up while he examined the cockpits quickly for any signs of a weapon. Satisfied, he turned back again.

"All right, *hombre,* hustle," he ordered, and in a moment more was dragging in soul-satisfying lungfuls of smoke.

Rex was not the man he had been in the previous days—every chance a carefully calculated one, one idea uppermost and his personal desires secondary. The pilot was actually hoping that no one would appear on the scene to spoil his plan. He yearned to pit himself against the man who had been a part of the vicious conspiracy against him, and the murderer of two old men besides. The flyer's chances were not more than one in five, but he leaped at the opportunity, slight though it was and horrible as the consequences would be to him if he failed.

Blocks were already under the wheels. He

climbed into the cockpit and turned on the gas. Then he pumped up the air pressure to three pounds and primed the cylinders with the little priming pump on the dashboard. This done, he climbed out again and twisted the propeller several times to suck additional gas into the engine.

Stearns watched him carefully as he worked. The murderer had taken the proffer of cigarets as a capitulation. He felt that Rex was afraid of him now; that the unsolicited smoke was an effort to dissipate Stearns' anger and resentment. The outlaw puffed contentedly at his second cigaret.

Rex climbed back into the cockpit, turned on the starting-switch, and whirled the self-starter rapidly. The booster-magneto failed to start the motor that time, but the second time it hit, thanks to the hot sun that had kept the sturdy hundred and eight horsepower engine warm.

As the roar of the motor filled the air Stearns became nervous for two reasons. One was that the noise might draw onlookers, and the other, and momentarily more important one, was the inevitable excitement and fear of the landsman

at the thought of a trip up into a most unsubstantial sky in a frail-looking linen-and-wood frame for a most disturbing big and noisy motor.

Stearns came close to the ship, leaning against the wind of the propeller, and bellowed into Lee's ear—

"We're startin' right now, hear?"

Rex cut the warming motor to idling as he said:

"She's got to warm up a little more or she's liable to cut. For Pete's sake don't try to butt in on flying—you don't know a thing about it and you'll just kill both of us if you don't lay off. She'll be ready in about a minute now—climb in and I'll strap you."

Stearns' face grew ugly for a moment, but he could not argue the matter. With his gun pointed at Rex he climbed in slowly and sank into the seat. It was another ticklish moment for Rex Lee's scheme as he fastened the huge snap-buckle on the wide canvas belt around Stearns. The gun was pressed tight against him as he did it.

"Keep your feet flat on the floor and your hands off everything, do you understand?"

said Rex, raising his voice only slightly, for the motor was still idling.

"Except you," retorted Stearns.

Rex grinned.

"I'm not forgetting that," he said.

He was leaning over from the front cockpit. He did not betray the fact that his plan was hanging on the narrow edge of failure if Stearns should realize but one thing—somehow it seemed to the pilot that the outlaw must think of it, but his voice was quiet and his air almost careless as he pointed out the throttle, on the left-hand side, the switch on the right, and the rudder as things to be avoided by an ignorant passenger. The stick had not been put in since it was removed to carry Corinne.

"You can send us into the ground by touching any one of them," Rex told him. "Well, I guess we can start as soon as I pull the blocks."

He turned up the motor for a moment. Temperature was only 65 Centigrade, but that would do in a pinch. It ran smoothly, so he cut the throttle, crawled beneath the wings and pulled the crude blocks Correll had fashioned.

He saw a car turn into the side road that led

to the field. Another one was rolling along the main pike. Far across the flat field, with the shacks dotting them at intervals, a few tiny figures could be seen where Mexicans were at work. It was quiet, peaceful, lazily rural and summery. That gun-barrel peering at him from the back cockpit was very close and very remindful, however.

He was going to be compelled to fly without helmet or goggles, as was Stearns. However, there were big isinglass windshields on the sturdy Jenny, and the speed would not be so tremendous nor the propeller blast so powerful as in a De Haviland. By hunching well down behind the windshield it would not be hard to fly for a few moments that would decide one or two things; whether only Blackie Stearns would lose, or whether they both would. Not until they actually got well off the ground would it be certain that he would have an opportunity to try his scheme.

He did not hurry as he lounged around the wing and climbed in. He was more deliberate than usual, in fact. Stearns, shaking in his fear, beckoned Rex with the gun as the flyer started to throw his leg over the cowl. Not by

the slightest sign did Rex betray the fact that it would have meant failure to all his plans if Stearns had waited another two seconds to indicate to the pilot that he wanted to say something.

"If you still want to have a pair o' eyes, fly south and don't stop and don't do nothin' but get there!" Stearns said as Rex leaned toward him.

Rex nodded once more, his eyes resting briefly on the unshaven forbidding face so close to his own. Then he slid into the front cockpit, buckled his belt swiftly and shoved on the throttle without an instant's delay. He was atingle with reckless delight as they sped across the ground and finally swept upward. He had gambled heavily, and so far the game was a winning one for him.

He flew straight south, climbing as fast as he dared. The westering sun was very close to the horizon—he must have slept a couple of hours. It was very bumpy—every time plowed land was beneath them the ship would rush upward, and the occasional damp places always flopped them earthward from ten to twenty feet as alternate currents of hot air, rushing

upward, and cold currents coming down, caught the ship.

The motor was turning sixteen hundred and getting hot. There was not a great deal of water in the radiator, he knew. Oil and air pressures were exactly right, though.

At a thousand feet he decided to take his chance. He looked back at Stearns, who was crouching down in his seat to save his eyes—Lee's own eyes were watery—he put up a hand to shield them as he looked back. No thought of pity for the man behind him undermined his determination. Had he been inclined that way, the tableau in the office that was etched on his memory would have decided him.

He banked so gradually that Stearns did not realize what he was doing until the ship had traveled a considerable distance back toward Ausman. Lee waited for the moment when Stearns would look around and see the waters of the Gulf stretching to his right instead of the left. What would he do—which one of two things? The next few seconds would determine whether Rex himself lived or died—for the murderer of Daddy George and Mr. Weston there was no hope in any event.

They were twelve hundred feet high now, and Rex turned in his seat, nosed down gradually. He noted subconsciously that the train was approaching the depot, three miles away from where they were flying. The glowing blue eyes watched Stearns like a hawk.

The rider looked up and his gaze met Lee's steady regard. He guarded his eyes with his hand as he straightened up to look over the side of the cockpit. The wires were screaming with the speed as, with motor wide open, the ship roared toward the ground.

For a moment the outlaw peered down steadily, then his eyes swept the Gulf—on his right instead of his left. The dark, forbidding face contorted with fury, and the big body lunged forward, a long arm stretched toward Rex.

The pilot was bent forward as far as possible. Stearns' arm did not reach within a foot of him. The buckled belt held him tight to the low seat—something that the landsman had not figured on.

It was the supreme moment for Rex. Would the raging Stearns use his gun in the heat of his wrath, or would he unbuckle his belt to reach him? Stearns struggled wildly for a mo-

ment, his eyes almost blinded by the terrific speed. Then Rex saw his head droop. In a second Stearns lunged for him, the belt buckle unsnapped.

Like a flash Rex jerked back on the stick and jammed on the left rudder. The ship swooped up and over on its back in a fast Immelman turn. The hand clutched at him for a second, and was gone. Rex was low—less than a thousand feet—but he pushed forward on the stick and neutralized his rudder, holding the ship on its back for a moment. Then he jerked back on the stick and swooped downward and right side up again, four hundred feet from the ground.

The back cockpit was empty.

CHAPTER XVIII

ALL'S WELL

CARRUTHERS, after a brief nap, had spent the afternoon with Corinne. The doctor had attended to securing an undertaker from Acacia, and the bodies of Mr. Weston and Daddy George, encased in simple coffins, were in the parlor of the Weston home. Corinne and Jack had escaped from the depressing influence of the silent house by taking a long walk.

As six o'clock approached, Jack, who knew that Rex half expected his father on the train, suggested to Corinne that they both go to the depot. Rex would be there, and they could meet Lee, senior. He had told her of Lee's idea that they have his father attend to straightening up the business affairs of Mr. Weston, and she had thankfully accepted. It would not be wise for either of the flyers to do it—Rex by reason of his conspicuous and unsavory notoriety, and Carruthers for still other reasons which he did not mention.

As the train whistled for the crossing a mile away Carruthers turned with a surprised exclamation.

"That sounds like a ship!"

"It is—see, there it is!" Corinne replied, pointing to the plane that was just rising above the houses and trees of Ausman.

"That's funny. I don't see why Rex is going up now, unless he wanted to escort his father in by airplane. If that was his idea, he's a little late."

The knot of hangers-on around the station—a quite considerable number, for Ausman was no different from other Southern towns in its habit of turning out to see the train come in—watched the ship interestedly.

The incoming train got little attention as everybody watched the plane turn back toward town. The train drew to a stop and the first of the passengers got off. Carruthers was starting forward to look for Mr. Lee when a scream from Corinne and loud exclamations from many others made him turn around.

The ship was just going on its back, and in speechless horror the onlookers saw the unmistakable body of a man fall out and come hur-

tling earthward. One arm around the half-fainting Corinne, Carruthers waited in dumb agony. Then a great shout came from his lips and he did a crazy dance around the platform.

"The ship came level—it isn't Rex!" he whooped in wild abandon of joy. Corinne could not believe her ears.

"I don't know what the deal is, but there's a pilot in that ship—look!" said Carruthers above the jostling, excited mob of people that surrounded them.

A huge, black-sombreroed figure threw a half-dozen people aside and grabbed Carruthers by the shoulder.

"Are you Jack Carruthers?"

The full-lined face was drawn and working, and beneath the gray mustache the mouth was a thin line. Carruthers looked up at the huge, gray-headed man with a radiant smile.

"I am and you're Mr. Lee. Don't worry—that was not Rex. See, the ship is all right and is coming down to land."

"Sure?" demanded the old ranchman, beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Absolutely. Let's get out there and see

what happened. I'm as much in the dark as you are."

The big ranchman drew a breath of relief. His eyes regained their customary twinkle and his mouth the whimsical crook that was so much like his son's expression.

"This is Miss Weston, Mr. Lee," said Carruthers.

Mr. Lee took her hand in both of his and patted it gently.

"I'm glad to know you, Miss Weston," he said, with more gentleness than many of his acquaintance would have believed he possessed.

He turned and looked over the heads of the people on the platform, who were jabbering excitedly. Many of them had started in autos and on foot for the field. The airplane was out of sight now—it had evidently landed.

"Oh, Cary. Come on—you, too, Corwin," boomed his great voice, and two men picked up grips and started toward them.

"I've got the town jitney engaged out here—or rather our private jitney. I hope he hasn't run away," Jack told Mr. Lee as they waited for the other two men.

Young Smith, his jaws working at blinding

speed, was awaiting them. Mr. Lee eased himself into the front seat and piled the baggage in around him. The two civilians and Corinne got in the back, and Jack hung on the running-board.

"Drive easy to save Miss Weston's arm," Jack ordered.

"Excuse me—this is Captain Cary of the Texas Rangers and Mr. Corwin of the Consolidated Press up in San Antone—Miss Weston and Lieutenant Carruthers," said Mr. Lee.

The ranger was a hatchet-faced keen-eyed man with the deep tan of the old-timer in Texas. He looked to be about forty years old. He was thin and wiry and had a pronounced drawl. The newspaperman possessed a cherubic countenance decorated with immense horn spectacles.

On the way to the field Carruthers, leaving out any reference to recent events in Ausman, talked continuously to keep any of the men from asking embarrassing questions in Corinne's presence. The ranger and Mr. Lee would know the full story eventually, but Jack did not want to discuss it in Corinne's hearing. It was comparatively easy to do, for everyone

was eager to find out the details of the horrible sight they had just witnessed.

At least a hundred people, half of them tattered Mexicans, were before them. An excited throng surrounded Rex, whose head could be seen above the crowd. Jack stood up on the running-board and yelled in stentorian tones. Rex caught sight of him and waved as he started toward the car.

"Hello, daddy—thought you might rove in," he greeted his father, shaking hands and acknowledging introductions to Corwin and Cary.

"What happened just now?" demanded his father.

Rex told them the story briefly. The crowd had followed him over. Prominent among them was Balavo, the Mexican, whose attention was about equally divided between the story and Corinne.

There was absolute silence as the flyer, his eyes on his father most of the time, sketched the tale.

"Mr. Weston's written story of the murder of himself and Daddy George—which you don't know the details of yet, gentlemen—named Stearns and he admitted his identity to me. I

guess I can clear myself on self-defense or something, anyway!"

"By the mighty! I'll bet a heap it's the man who shot Bogie Bill Drumm!" exclaimed the ranger.

He and Corwin, whose round eyes were sparkling behind his glasses, told Rex of the recent murder of the showman. The ranger made off toward the next field where the remains of Stearns lay. Rex told him that Smithers was already on the job, and that most of the posse that had come down on the train was already there likewise. Cary, who was familiar with various specifications in the nation-wide circular that had gone out describing Stearns, could not rest until he satisfied himself whether the dead man was the wanted murderer of Bogie Bill or not.

The crowd followed the ranger—rumors of his identity had already been spread about—and left the others reasonably free from curious onlookers. Mr. Lee, with rare tact that seemed incongruous to associate with so big and direct a personality, did not question his son regarding the double murder or what he had found out about Fitzpatrick.

"Rex, boy, you got away on this Stearns thing just now, but what in hallelujah did you run your neck in a noose like that for? That bird was liable to muss you up there."

Rex standing with hands in the back pockets of his breeches, grinned at his gray-haired parent.

"I don't suppose you ever took a chance, did you?" he inquired.

His father looked at him severely.

"That's no excuse, you wild-eyed totally foolish kid! I'll bet you were tickled to death at the chance!"

Rex sobered, his eyes turning to Corinne's face for a moment. He leaned over and touched her hand lightly.

"I was, dad. Stearns had it coming to him, you know."

Mr. Lee turned around and met the girl's eyes.

"He sure did—don't think I'm not tickled to death your father's murderer is punished, Miss Weston; and furthermore, I'd 'a' done the same thing in Rex's place."

She smiled faintly—and gained a powerful ally in Roaring Bill Lee.

"It was the same *hombre!*" came Cary's voice as he and Smithers hurried toward the car.

The newspaperman's eyes snapped.

"Gee, what a story," he breathed.

He was aching to get to the telegraph office. Details of the murder of Mr. Weston and the night watchman could wait for another story —with luck he could land an extra in every city in Texas that night.

"Well, boys, we've got to thrash things out *pronto,*" declared Lee, senior. "Looks like poetic justice and all that sort of thing has been perpetrated by this scamp of a son of mine, but I guess there's a few ends to be cleaned up yet. Let's go, shall we?"

"Smithers, suppose you tend to getting Stearns' body downtown and so forth," Cary said to the county sheriff, who had been waiting silently. "Come to the hotel after supper and we'll get down to tacks."

"Suits me," barked Smithers, and made off with quick, short strides.

"Corinne, you're coming to the hotel tonight to eat," stated Carruthers from the running-board.

Rex was on the other one, and the overloaded jitney made hard going over the sandy road, now deeply rutted from the passage of many cars.

"Of course she is," stated Mr. Lee heartily. He surmised the friendless condition of the lovely girl—his son's wire had mentioned her.

Smithers, several of his deputies, the ranger, the newspaperman and the Lees occupied a big table at the hotel, with Carruthers and Corinne at a smaller one near the window. After dinner Jack and Corinne wandered off toward the bank of the Gulf, and Smithers, Rex, his father and Cary went into executive session. The flyer's telegram had been phoned to his father in Austin, and he had picked up Cary, an old friend, and started immediately. Corwin, a friend of Cary's, had been on the train from San Antonio, Ausman-bound.

Rex told them all that had happened, answering innumerable questions from the keen-eyed Cary and his father as he went along. He read the confession of Mr. Weston aloud. When he had finished the tale Cary turned to the ranchman and remarked dryly—

"Quite a son you got, Bill."

Mr. Lee shook his head sadly as he looked at the smiling Rex.

"It's an awful thing not to be able to control your children," he opined. "Well, son, this is just about going to clear up your mess at Donovan Field, I guess without what little we've accomplished. Old Bill Trowbridge, sheriff of Hidalgo County, finally landed the soldier who had been seen chumming around with a strange Mexican, and he confessed that he got drunk on guard the night before you and Hickman left for Donovan, on liquor this spig, who was a well-dressed, classy-lookin' Mex, gave him. That's something, but we can't find hide nor hair of said spig."

"Well," said Captain Cary of the Rangers slowly, "here's what we've got, as I see it. Fitzpatrick's in jail, with a confession that's ironclad and will be the means of getting lots more evidence, to break him. Dave's goose is cooked. The murderer of Weston and old George Dobey has been attended to. From what your boy here says about Dale, he'll talk when he's caught, and Smithers has fixed it so he sure will be. Others in this town'll tell all they know, too, and some o' that bunch that's

been rounded up along the border will converse free and easy when they find old Dave's up a tree. As far as this smuggling deal of the boy here is concerned, there's no chance of anything but an acquittal—maybe dismissal of the charges without a court-martial or a trial of any kind. It would be a little better from your viewpoint if that could be cleaned up complete by nailing whoever planted the opium, but I'm afraid we can't do that."

Smithers nodded his agreement with the ranger's summary.

"Well, Rex, for once your infernal ability to get into trouble has got you some gravy, as it were," grinned Mr. Lee, throwing his cigaret butt into the water below. The men were seated on the bank.

"Looks that way," admitted Rex.

Next morning, while the representatives of the law were very busy, Mr. Lee and Rex went over Mr. Weston's papers. They found a fully paid life insurance policy for twenty thousand dollars, payable to Corinne, and a bank account in a San Antonio bank of some ten thousand dollars more. They went up to the Weston home, and after a long talk with Corinne Mr.

Lee persuaded her to accept a stable loan pending the settling of her father's estate. It was decided that Corinne should live in San Antonio for a while at least, and take with her the little housekeeper that had been with the Westons so long. Jack Carruthers nearly turned a handspring on the front porch when this was settled.

The hotel dining-room that evening held several newspapermen in addition to the three airmen, Mr. Lee, Smithers and Captain Cary, and Corinne. Mr. Weston's confession had been kept a secret—all that newspapermen knew was that there was excellent secret evidence to account for Fitzpatrick's incarceration, and the fixing of the crime of the double murder on Stearns, wanted for the death of Bogie Bill Drumm. The best news men in Texas were there. The importance of Mr. Lee in Texas, the sensational career of his son, and the vague but widespread fame of Dave Fitzpatrick made it the story of their lives for the journalists.

There was to be one more event to give the final touch, and force the bright young men of the press into almost hysterical bursts of

literary invention as they wrote their stories.

The small dining-room was buzzing as the details of the last few days were gone over for the 'steenth time. Without warning a short, bow-legged man appeared in the doorway. He was dressed in a faded sack suit, boots and flannel shirt. Two guns sagged from beneath the coat.

Rex, who was sitting at the lower end of the long table, saw him first.

"Searles!" he exclaimed involuntarily as he recognized one of the participants in the El Paso poker game which represented his first contact with Dave Fitzpatrick.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" burst from Mr. Lee in utter surprise.

He made a move as if he were going to rise. So quickly that it seemed like a feat of magic two long guns covered the company. Searles' tanned, wrinkled face did not change, nor did the inscrutable, puckered eyes betray excitement.

"Sit down, please, and everybody put their hands on the table," said Searles.

Everyone obeyed, as if in a trance. Corinne's eyes were wide and frightened.

"Gentlemen—and Miss Weston—I ain't aimin' to keep you long. I was a friend o' Daddy George Dobey's, which was killed by that skunk Stearns. I been hangin' around to settle up with Stearns myself, but this young wildcat here done it for me, I hear, and done it dawg-gone well—if you'll pardon my swearin', Miss Weston.

"Consequently, feelin' considerable happy and relieved over the original and satisfactory method invented by young Lee here, I figured I'd try to do him a favor that might help out a little. I'm blowin', Cary," he added, his eyes turning to the ranger.

"What I wanted to say was this—if you want the straight of that opium deal which you're hung for at present, get Manuel Veriga, that you'll find hangin' out in Juarez. He may be in Mexico City now, but he'll be back before long. He's yellow, and he planted the stuff in your ship, Lee. He'll tell all he knows if you catch him. Get him at the end of a gun in Juarez, and he'll sign a confession before witnesses. Snow, in San Antonio, was in the scheme, too, but don't know much about it.

"That's all, only it won't be healthy for any-

body to start chasin' me when I go from here. You ain't got nothin' on me, Cary, but in case you took a notion to grab me—don't. Just set here for a matter of fifteen minutes until I make one o' these launch—"

"Don't worry, Searles," boomed Mr. Lee. "You ain't going to be bothered—I believe your information is straight."

"It is," stated the imperturbable Searles. "I figured you might not want to bother me."

"Been playin' any poker lately, Searles?" queried the old man with twinkling eyes.

The ghost of a smile hovered on the outlaw's lips as he looked at Rex. He shook his head slightly in humorous self-depreciation and vanished into the deepening dusk.

An hour later Mr. Lee and Captain Cary were seated on the veranda of the Smith hostelry, smoking and talking as they gazed out across the Gulf. Jack and Corinne were sitting on the bank, in the deep shadow cast by a gnarled mesquite tree. A full moon blazed a shimmering path of pale silver across the tranquil water. Even Ausman seemed beautiful in the soft light and deep shadows that gilded or hid all that was ugly. The lights of

one slowly moving vessel twinkled from afar across the water.

Rex, who had been talking with the reporters, came slowly around the corner of the hotel and walked to the edge of the bank. He did not notice either of the pair who were watching him. He stood quietly, in his characteristic position of lounging ease, hands resting in the back pockets of his trousers.

Up on the porch Cary pulled at his pipe.

"That boy o' yours has got a lot o' the Old Nick in him, hasn't he, Bill?" he queried.

"He has," agreed the old ranchman. "He's always been sort of harmlessly wild, if you get what I mean, but that don't worry me. What I do mind is his infernal habit of steppin' into holes just for the fun of gettin' out of 'em."

"At which he's a bear," stated the ranger.

Corinne was wondering what Rex was thinking about as he stood looking out across the water. She would have been surprised had she known. Recent events played a part in his thoughts, but the whimsical cast of his features was very pronounced as his level blue eyes remained fixed on the lights of the passing ship, far across the Gulf. Rex was living up to the

motto which, probably unrealized by even himself, epitomized his attitude toward life, in so far as he individually was concerned—

It takes a good man to laugh at himself.

THE END

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